SFX

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DESIGNING A LEGEND

HALO
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Why season two is a whole new take on the iconic game

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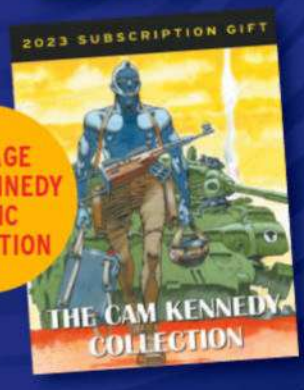

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Playing the Game with *Dragon's Claws*.

First Contact

Hailing Frequencies Open!

GODZILLA PLUS ONE

Jonathan Harvey, email Oh no, not another Godzilla movie!

But hang on, this one is different. The humans are interesting, flawed people you can't help but feel for in their struggles with everyday life, not just the threat of being stomped on by a giant radioactive lizard.

Setting it in post-war Japan makes it feel refreshingly different after a diet of Hollywood Godzillas and mechanical monster mayhem from various movies including *Transformers* and *Pacific Rim*.

The biggest problem of recent Godzilla movies has been the dull, tedious humans. This one not only solves that problem but gives us a big, scary, destructive Godzilla that smashes up cities and battleships alike.

As an extra bonus there is a mad scientist with a wild and crazy plan to kill Godzilla – battleships and tanks just won't cut it. A fun, meaningful and dramatic addition to the *Godzilla* series that stomps all over its recent competition.

SFX: Look out for a special rerelease in monstrous monochrome!

THE SFX FACTOR

Donald J Makin, email Aged 14, I saw the first ever issue of *SFX*. It introduced me to series I never watched and books I had never heard of.

In a world of streaming, *SFX* is even more important. If it wasn't for your magazine I'd have missed *The Boys*, *Yellowjackets* and *The Lazarus Project to* name a few.

I still get as excited now as when I was a teenager – and I grab some peace in the bath to read about some stuff I know and some stuff I know nothing about in sci-fi.

Thanks for your great work over the years. Keep helping us find the gems in the huge universe of streaming!

SFX: We're always here for you, Donald. But go easy on the bubble bath, mate.

***The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon* is *The Littlest Hobo* with zombies.**
Michael Mamike Garner

Ruby could be the best companion since Amy.
@DavidHanse24754

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"I'm more like the *Labyrinth* junk lady"

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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ Loved "The Church On Ruby Road", loved the chemistry, here we go again!
→ Rumours of a permanent Universal Horror attraction in the UK are very exciting.
→ I am *ready* for *Dune: Part Two*. I've seen early footage and it's *spectacular*.
→ Catching up on 14-year-old documentary series *A History Of Horror With Mark Gatiss* means I'm suddenly finding myself ordering a *lot* of Blu-ray box sets...

RANTS

→ Just really, really bored of "fandom" slagging things off online now. Stop making hate your personality, life is really short! Drink some water, go outside.

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Enjoyed the *Imagine* documentary on Russell T Davies – especially the glimpses of *Doctor Who* comics he drew as a kid. When's the graphic novel collection coming out?
→ There are some interesting-sounding genre titles in the Japan Foundation's touring programme (2 February to 31 March), including *From The End Of The World* and *The Inerasable*. Visit jpf-film.org.uk to see if they'll be screening near you.
→ Top of my Blu-ray wishlist: Jess Franco's "faithful" 1970 take on Count Dracula (starring Christopher Lee), which is getting a UK 4K release on 25 March. Somehow I've never seen it. Good old 88 Films!
→ My love affair with the British Library's *Tales Of The Weird* series continues. Intrigued by February's release, Jessie Douglas Kerruish's 1922 novel *The Undying Monster*.

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ Enjoyed *Leave The World Behind* – the unsettling audio and eerie, disorientating visuals were really effective (and I'm not just talking about that dance sequence!)
→ Very sad to say goodbye to *Ghosts*, but thought the final episode was just perfect!

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RANTS

→ Despite my initial enthusiasm for *Starfield*, I think it's fair to say Bethesda has pretty much given up on it. Updates every six weeks, five months after release? Not good enough.

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

→ *Godzilla Minus One* was fabulous, almost an arthouse kaiju flick. A lesson for Hollywood in how to wow on a tiny budget – and tell a story with genuine heart and people you care for.
→ Currently enjoying *Superspy Science* by Kathryn Harkup, a fun, fresh take on the Bond films. Essential reading for your volcanic lair.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Arcane* is back for season two in November and I'm beside myself with excitement. The best animated series in years; I can't wait to see how they top their story, aesthetics and music in the follow-up.

Captain's Log

Not even a month into 2024 and it's already looking like a year fit to burst with books, comics, games, films and shows. I know I keep saying it, but I still have to pinch myself at living in something of a golden age for all things genre. It's just as well that there's a lot to choose from...

Sorry to any fans of films involving researching spiders in the Amazon – another superhero movie where there weren't any photos available for us to do a feature, I'm afraid. If only those mega-budget movies – made out of thousands of images – had some way of capturing photos. Hey ho, I'm sure it won't impact the success.

Also, no *Walking Dead*! Years in the making, but we still couldn't land it in time. Rotten fingers crossed for next month. Until then, a return and a revamp for *Halo*, the continuation of Kevin Smith's *Masters Of The Universe* and a new live action version of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Plus more of our exclusive behind-the-scenes coverage, including *Monarch: Legacy Of Monsters*, *The Winter King* and, of course, *Doctor Who*.

It really is a joy to still be able to bring *SFX* to you every four weeks – can you believe that we'll be 30 next year? It hardly seems like yesterday since that very first cover with *Tank Girl* and here we are with everyone thinking the stuff we've always liked is cool too. Here's to another year of being ahead of the curve!

Darren
X

SFX

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SCARED OF THE DARK

Why this version of *Orion And The Dark* is next-level

Highlights

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THUNDERCATS

Feel the magic, hear the roar – those Thunderians have been let loose in their own comic again.

15
STAR TREK

Daddy this, daddy that. Well screw *that*, internet – this new series is all about Starfleet offspring.

17
DOCTOR WHO

Yes, even more news from the Whoniverse – some of you seem to be rather fond of it.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Dark Fantasy

Why **Orion And The Dark** is a children's story unlike any other

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

SOMEWHERE IN THE multiverse, there exists a version of *Orion And The Dark* that's a straightforward retelling of Emma Yarlett's adorable picture book – a simple story about a boy who's scared of the dark but ends up befriending a mysterious entity that embodies the night. This is not that universe.

"You give that book to 99.9% of the other screenwriters in Hollywood, you get that version of the film," says producer Peter McCown. "Charlie Kaufman just takes it to a different level."

Yes, he's talking about *that* Charlie Kaufman, the writer behind *Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation* and *Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind*. Considering that his last animated feature, the stop-motion film *Anomalisa* – about a supermarket worker who believes everyone else in the world is the same person – was described as an "obsessive drama about human suffering" by *Time*, Kaufman doesn't seem like an obvious match for *Orion*.

And yet Netflix's animation works wonderfully well, going far beyond Yarlett's 40-page parable about why darkness isn't really very scary (a scattering of Amazon reviews indicate that it's particularly good for helping put children to bed).

In Kaufman's version, directed by Sean Charmatz – previously best known for TV special *Trolls: Holiday In Harmony*– the nervous, nerdy Orion (voiced by Jacob Tremblay) is an outcast at school who's debilitatingly afraid of everything. One night, he's visited by the literal embodiment of his greatest fear, Dark (Paul Walter Hauser). The two go on an overnight adventure that sees Orion meet multiple other nighttime entities.

"Kaufman's just able to kind of go deeper and add additional layers which were not in the book," McCown says. "He does it in a way that keeps the main character relatable, which we were worried would be hard to do because he's like a mini Charlie Kaufman. Orion's sometimes not relatable, but in that sense he's extremely relatable because, whether it's the dark or something else that you're afraid of, everyone has fear and anxiety."

Still, it's not all worry and gloom.

Orion and Dark set off on an adventure.

Orion is "a ball of adolescent anxiety", we're told.

> "Charlie Kaufman's just able to kind of go deeper and add additional layers"

That sounds straightforward enough, but this is a Kaufman story, and it soon becomes extremely meta. A second narrative unfolds: Orion's story is, we learn, being told by a grown-up Orion to his own daughter, *The Princess Bride*-style. And then another layer becomes apparent, and another, and another. It's all quite complex.

"I was listening to a hip-hop song which sampled Nic Cage in *Adaptation*," says Charmatz. "He's going on this rant about how not every movie needs to give a character an arc, you don't have to have a third act. Because Charlie wrote this movie, we wanted to make sure it kept that unique point of view."

To keep the film kid-friendly, and make sure the story held together, Charmatz took pains to ensure that everything about the character of Orion was really clear – that we are never confused about his feelings and motivations. By having that grounding, the filmmaker was able to include wilder and wilder ideas (and there really are some big swings towards the end). "No matter who the characters are with these high-concept ideas, like the night entities, you're never confused about the movie on a fundamental level," he says.

McCown adds that the fact the movie is on Netflix allowed them to try and "fit a square peg into the round hole", suggesting that had this been a major theatrical release they would have received different studio notes.

"Yes, we did have to tweak, and yes, we did have to pull out some Kaufman things, but I don't think we necessarily changed what the Kaufman essence was. [Charmatz] was great about keeping that true, and keeping what makes this special and a little edgy and a little aged-up compared to what some major studios normally make.

"We work in animation," he continues. "We're not always excited about seeing every animated film, but this is something we're excited about seeing. If you told me, as a fan, 'There's a Charlie Kaufman film coming from DreamWorks on Netflix,' I'm absolutely going to watch that. And I think finding out and seeing how good it really is, and what [Charmatz] was able to do, expanding even on what Charlie brought, it made it more special."

However, even with the meta-narrative and wild ideas, the core themes of *Orion And The Dark* remain the same. "We hope that it genuinely helps some parents, some kids, some adults, to realise that it's not worth it to be upset and anxious, because all that does is ruin your life, it ruins being in the moment and enjoying the beautiful world," Charmatz says.

"That's why the book is well-loved. It's an important thing to share with kids."

Orion And The Dark is on Netflix from 2 February.

SCI-FACT! **Producer Peter McCown's animation credits include *Kubo And The Two Strings*, *Rise Of The Guardians* and *Kung Fu Panda*.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Space Oddity

Noomi Rapace's astronaut has an uneasy homecoming in **Constellation**

WORDS: **IAN BERRIMAN**

IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE WE heard from Peter Harness, the writer behind the TV adaptation of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* and 2019's period take on *The War Of The Worlds* (plus four *Doctor Who* episodes for Peter Capaldi). Now he's back, with an original eight-part series.

Described as a "conspiracy-based psychological thriller", *Constellation* centres on Jo, a Swedish astronaut who returns to Earth after surviving a disaster on the International Space Station, only to find that "key pieces of her life seem to be missing".

Harness got involved after the producers asked if he'd be interested in writing something related to astronauts coming home. "It felt like it enabled a lot of different things that I was interested in to collide with each other," he tells Red Alert. "I'm interested in the history of the space program, where it's at, and where it's likely to be. And I'm also interested in the conspiracy theories."

By this he *doesn't* mean the "question" of whether the Apollo moon landings were faked (no, tinfoil enthusiasts, they weren't). "There's a number of weird stories and suggestions of things that might have gone differently, and slightly spooky stories about space. I collided that with an interest in general weirdness and horror to see whether there was a world where one thing could explain the other, and they could bounce off each other."

For now, Harness is tight-lipped on the subject of *how* exactly Jo's life has changed – and what (if any) sci-fi concept might account for that. "I think people who are well-versed in the genre will probably be able to spot it relatively soon, but we don't give it away fully until a bit further in." Furthermore, he adds, while there are "a couple of twists", they aren't really "the big story". "It's got a very strong emotional drama at the heart of it," he explains. "It's really about how going into space fundamentally alters your centre of gravity, and you come back to a world that it's very difficult to fit back into – which is a common experience for astronauts. But this has a slightly heightened twist on it."

Noomi Rapace (*The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*, *Prometheus*) plays Jo. Assigned to the ISS to study the psychological and neurological effects of space travel, she comes home to her husband and nine-year-old daughter "shell-shocked", having been through a very traumatic experience. "It's always arguable that what she's going through might just be a genuine psychological reaction to everything she's been through," Harness notes.

"It's a very raw and tender performance," the writer says of his star. "She's a very tough, driven and determined actor, and her characters are often like that, but she really gets to show a big range of emotional textures in this. It's a different kind of part for her, and I think she's splendid in it."

Another key piece of casting sees Jonathan Banks (best known as fixer Mike Ehrmantraut in *Breaking Bad*) playing Henry. "He's a physicist and former Apollo astronaut," Harness says, "A very interesting character."

That's about all we're getting on *that* subject,

Jo (Noomi Rapace) isn't having a good time.

although he is full of praise for the actor. "Obviously he's very tough and threatening, but also a joy to write jokes for. He's very funny, and capable of being very tender as well. He's quite teddy bear-ish, really. Beneath that gruff exterior he's a softie."

While we were assuming that *Constellation* is a day-after-tomorrow affair, it turns out it takes place in the near-past. "It's actually set in 2021, I think," Harness says. Much of the filming took place in Cologne, real-life home of the European Space Agency. Morocco, meanwhile, doubled for Baikonur in Kazakhstan, home of the Russian space program. "We've built a highly authentic set for the ISS, and we've had a lot of consultants – astronauts and people who work for NASA and ESA. So it's very authentic in its details. I'm hoping that makes the weird stuff and the scary stuff feel real as well."

> **"As the psychological screw starts to turn you become more focused on the characters"**

Although the show is (metaphorically speaking) grounded, we're promised that it will also be "action-packed". So can we expect to see Noomi Rapace hanging off the side of a jet? "No, but you'll see her hanging off the side of the International Space Station!" Harness laughs. "We go back to Earth after a while, but there's still a significant amount of space, and a significant amount of action.

"It starts off fairly action-heavy, and fast. Then as the psychological screw starts to turn you become more and more focused on the characters. But that's when they're becoming more and more endangered. So there's a bunch of action and danger in it until the end."

Could the series continue beyond that point? "I'm hoping it will, because there's plenty more story to tell," says Harness. "I'm very, very proud of it – I wouldn't change a single thing. Without blowing my own trumpet, I think it's unlike anything else. And I think it's different to what people might be expecting."

Constellation is on Apple TV+ from 21 February.

Jonathan Banks as the mysterious Henry.

SCI-FACT! **Peter Harness once pitched a *Doctor Who* episode featuring renegade Time Lord the Meddling Monk.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- Naomi Scott joining the **Smile** sequel, set to be written and directed by Parker Finn.
- **Maleficent 3** in development at Disney for a returning Angelina Jolie.
- Sean Gunn to play villainous tycoon Maxwell Lord in brother James's DC universe.
- Christopher Abbott replacing Ryan Gosling in Blumhouse's **The Wolf Man**.
- Kari Skogland directing **The Age Of Legends**, first of a prequel trilogy to Robert Jordan's *The Wheel Of Time*.
- Viola Davis and Awkwafina joining the voice cast of **Kung Fu Panda 4**.
- Jonathan Majors no longer playing Kang for Marvel Studios after being convicted of assault. No word if the role will be recast...
- Director Christopher Landon exiting **Scream VII** (is anyone left?).
- *Wednesday*'s Emma Myers starring in the **Minecraft** movie alongside Jason Momoa and Jack Black.
- Horror videogame **Bendy And The Ink Machine** set for big-screen adaptation.
- **Superman: Legacy** set to begin filming this March. Up, up and away!

STEVE GRANITZ/GETTY

SCI-FACT! **Comics of other Warner animated series such as *Jonny Quest*, *Space Ghost* and *The Flintstones* are also in the pipeline.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Cat People

ThunderCats return to comics, and their origins, in Dynamite Entertainment's new series WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

Cover art for the first issue, by Declan Shalvey.

A BIG CHILDHOOD FAN OF *ThunderCats*, Declan Shalvey is now writing a new monthly series starring the fearsome felines for Dynamite Entertainment's new line of comics based on Warner Bros Discovery's animated properties.

"I found the original cartoons in the same way that every kid did back then," Shalvey tells Red Alert. "As that classic opening came on the TV, I was transfixed. It was like pure adrenaline on the screen! I was just the right age when *ThunderCats* debuted, or at least by the time it debuted in Ireland, as back then it took a while for American shows to make it over the Atlantic."

With the damaged Royal Flagship landing on Third Earth after the ThunderCats flee their devastated home world of Thundera, the series is set some time before the events of the animated show, which ran for four seasons from 1985 to 1988.

"I just went back to the source; the first episodes of the cartoon," explains Shalvey. "I didn't want to get bogged down in too much of the lore, as essentially we are creating a new one, using the original series as a jumping-off point. The origin story is the same, but I wanted to see the ThunderCats on the back foot. The Royals are now homeless, looking to find security and safety while dealing with huge new problems they couldn't possibly foresee."

With its natural features ranging from the Acid Lake to the Cliffs of Vertigo, Third Earth's diverse milieu acts as an interesting backdrop for the ThunderCats.

"The environment is really a tool to force the characters together in order to see if any friction forms," says Shalvey. "In the cartoon, Third Earth provided pretty much any kind of environment you could imagine from episode to episode. I don't think we have the room to do that so much in this series, but it opens the door for a lot of potential stories down the line."

To begin with, the series centres around Lion-O, the hereditary Lord and leader of the ThunderCats. "The first arc is mainly focused on him and his relationship with his fellow Thundarians as they face these new – and old – threats," adds Shalvey. "Once this interpretation of the book is established, I want to dive into the other characters more, so you'll see some familiar faces, but in a new context."

The ThunderCats are pursued by their mortal enemies the Mutants of Plun-darr; determined to get their hands on the mystical gem the Eye of Thundera, they form an alliance with Mumm-Ra, the devil-priest of Third Earth.

Stating that he was "over the moon" when editor Nate Crosby proposed Drew Moss for *ThunderCats*, Shalvey is "delighted" with the work of the artist. "Action, emotion, imagination, Drew's got it all," he says. "What I especially love about his designs is that they are contemporary yet evoke familiar sensibilities from the source material."

ThunderCats issue one is out on 7 February.

Main cover art for issue one, by Maria Sanapo.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Clawing Back

Archie is returning **The Jaguar** to her roots in a new one-shot comic

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER BRINGING back Bob Phantom and Darkling, Archie Comics are now returning to the Jaguar. While original Jaguar Ralph Hardy first gained feline powers after discovering a magical totem on an archaeological dig in Peru, in 1961's *Adventures Of The Jaguar*, this new one-shot focuses on Ivette Velez, who took over the role in 2012's *The Mighty Crusaders*. A zoologist by trade, she journeys to South America to solve the mystery of who is killing the Pampas cats of Northern Peru.

"I love that the earliest Jaguar stories featured Ralph Hardy on adventures abroad," writer Keryl Brown Ahmed tells Red Alert. "I personally have an international background, so I jumped at the opportunity to go back to the roots of the character and have Ivette's story take place in a setting far from her home."

ROOT CAUSES

With her family having hailed from Peru, Ivette unexpectedly reconnects with her heritage. "At the start of the story she doesn't even consider herself Peruvian, but it doesn't take long before she realises that her powers are deeply tied to her ancestry, and in order to harness them she'll have to embrace her roots," explains Ahmed, who can personally relate to Ivette.

"As a child of an immigrant who feels a tenuous connection to my family's homeland, I certainly have the fantasy of going back and strengthening my identity and connection to the culture."

Ahmed, who is paired with artist Tango, also explores the Jaguar's animalistic abilities. "I really enjoyed writing a character who channels the powers of a big cat," she continues. "I'm a cat person and my family is from Kenya, the safari capital of the world, so I've always had a thing for cats of all sizes! It was fun to research the two types of cats that appear in the one-shot, and crafting a story featuring zoologists allowed me to geek out a little bit."

"I've got a real soft spot for female characters who are allowed to really tap into their rage, and the connection with Ai Apaec gives Ivette more access to that part of herself," adds Tango, referring to the god who gives the Jaguar their powers. "One of my favourite little things in the issue is the way Keryl brilliantly has Ivette subtly aloof and antisocial in a very housecat way, even out of the Jaguar suit."

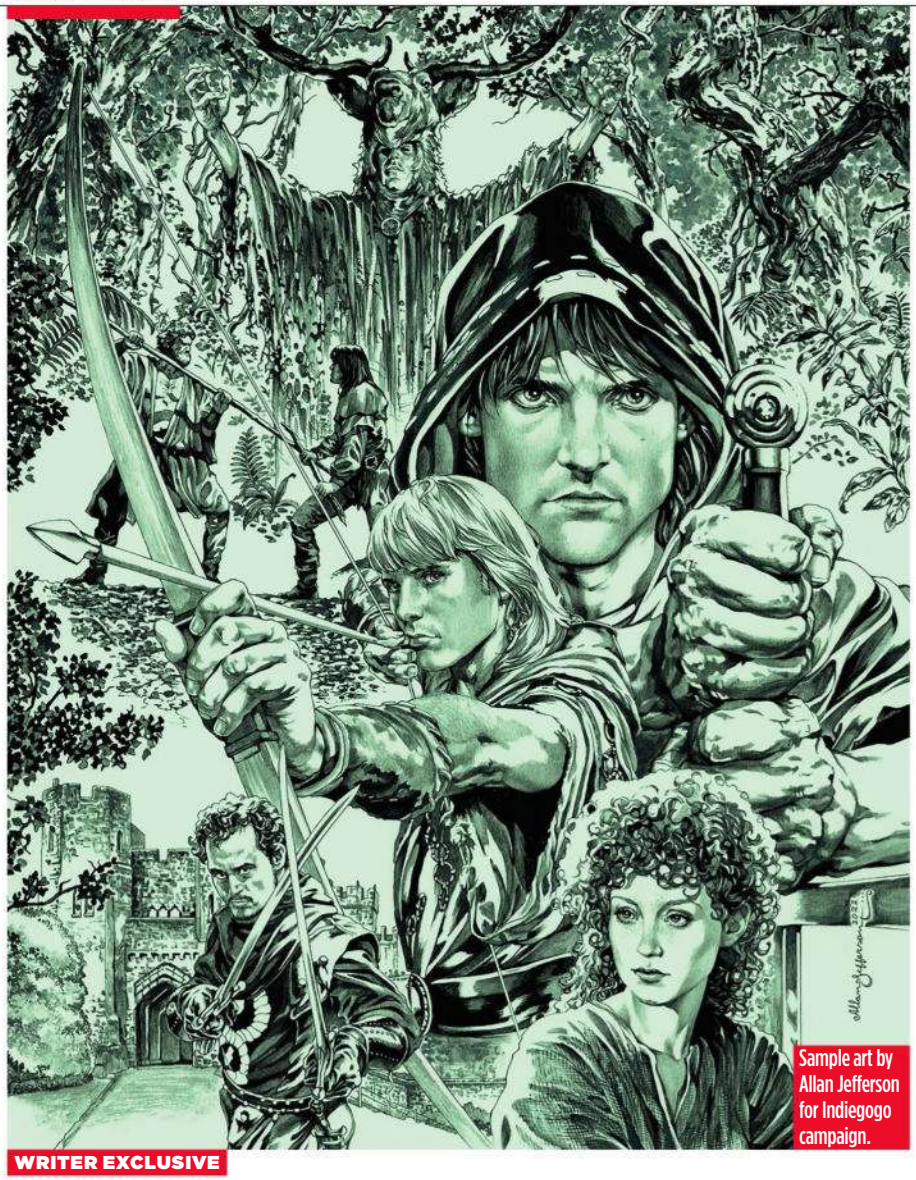
Ahmed also resurrects old *Mighty Crusaders* villain the Buzzard. "He's the same in name only, as I've significantly revamped his character," she says. "But I was inspired by the past *Crusaders* issues and wanted to include another callback to them."

Tango has also been delving into *The Mighty Crusaders*' back catalogue, taking inspiration from some of the Archie team book's past artists, including Steve Ditko and Alex Toth. "I'm always striving for a touch of that classic comics feel in my work," he says. "As part of my research, I went through all the prior iterations of the Jaguar, since with any legacy character it's important to draw from the elements that feel core to what makes them work, and especially what already makes them endearing to fans."

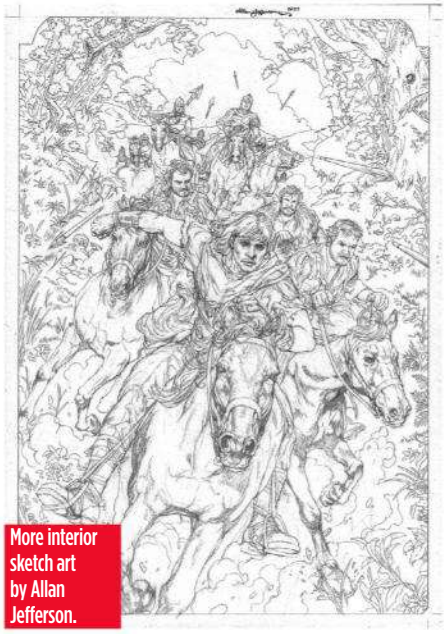
The Jaguar issue one is out on 21 February.

SCI-FACT! **When the Archie superheroes were published by DC's Impact in the '90s, The Jaguar was Brazilian student Maria de Guzman.**

SCI-FACT! **Chinbeard Books have also released a collection of the *Robin Of Sherwood* comic strips, which ran in *Look-in* from 1984 to 1986.**



Sample art by Allan Jefferson for Indiegogo campaign.



More interior sketch art by Allan Jefferson.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Dynamic Duo

The two Robins of Sherwood meet for the first time in graphic novel **The Hooded Men**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER TAKING ON THE ROLE OF ROBIN OF LOXLEY IN 1984's inaugural series of *Robin Of Sherwood*, Michael Praed was replaced by Jason Connery, who played a completely different incarnation of the legendary outlaw, Robert of Huntingdon, in 1986's third and final series. Now the pair are meeting for the first time in *The Hooded Men*, a new graphic novel from Chinbeard Books, set to be released on 28 April – the 40th anniversary of when *Robin Of Sherwood* first screened on ITV.

"It really started with a 'What if the two Robins came together?' and how and why would that happen, and what would the mechanism be that would make that happen?" says writer John Semper, who is teaming up with Brazilian artist Allan Jefferson. "It stemmed from my desire to work with both Robins and to personally write both of those characters."

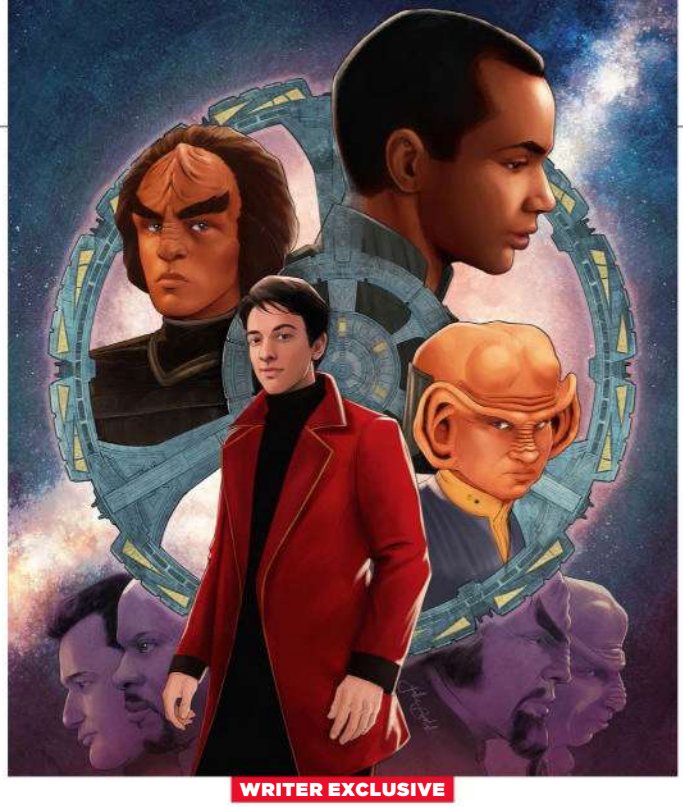
A Los Angeles-based screenwriter who first created the concept of the Spider-Verse for *Spider-Man: The Animated Series*, Semper compares *The Hooded Men* to a missing episode of *Robin Of Sherwood* itself. "This is something that could have been done for television if they'd been given another season," he explains. "So it was about extending a world that already existed and was so well delineated by [series creator] Richard Carpenter."

Having first seen the show on US channel Showtime in the '80s, Semper was impressed by how *Robin Of Sherwood* combined historical drama with ancient mythology. "It was like an early precursor of something like *Game Of Thrones*, which did a wonderful job of mixing medieval fantasy with action adventure in a way that nobody had done before, and I think *Robin Of Sherwood* was the seedling from which that kind of thinking was hatched.

"I also felt there was a lot of Akira Kurosawa in Richard Carpenter's interpretation of Robin of Sherwood," he continues, "which was not just adventurous but also sort of spiritual as well. I don't mean that in a religious sense, it's more that it's based on a kind of belief system. The Merry Men, Robin and Marian are all immersed in a pagan spiritualism that I thought was brilliant. My graphic novel definitely brings an element of fantasy into it, but it's still very rooted in the world of Robin Hood that we know so well."

Describing them as "radically different people", Semper was determined that the two Robins would be firm friends from the outset. "I didn't want to do that trope where two beloved characters meet and instantly hate each other," he says. "The first Robin grew up very poor and the second grew up a bit upper-class and somewhat wealthy. But the fun is in seeing them getting together and enjoying each other's company. I really can't tell you how they cross paths but it's very clever and not hokey," he teases. "It's very organic to the way that the show is and it's even a little bit rooted in history."

Robin Of Sherwood – The Hooded Men is available on Indiegogo and released in April.



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Rising Sons

Jake Sisko and Alexander Rozhenko find family in an alternate universe in **Sons Of Star Trek**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

LIVING UP TO A legendary parent is no easy task, as both Jake Sisko and Alexander Rozhenko – the respective offspring of Benjamin Sisko and Worf – discover in IDW's new miniseries, *Sons Of Star Trek*.

"It's very much about the pressures that come with being the son of someone important in the *Star Trek* universe," writer Morgan Hampton tells Red Alert. "But that means different things to Jake than it does to Alexander, for example."

With Hampton describing it as "a natural progression", *Sons Of Star Trek* spins out of last year's *Day Of Blood* crossover, which encompassed both IDW's flagship *Star Trek* title and *Star Trek: Defiant*. "It's really awesome to be able to pull from events from these comics and expand on them and use them to flesh out these characters," he says. "But at its heart, it's definitely about exploring how these characters live up to and try to come out of the shadows cast by their fathers, and how difficult and transformative that can be."

Both struggling to realise where they fit in after the conclusion of *Day Of Blood*, Jake and Alexander are hurled into a parallel dimension, where they find that they've achieved the same level of Starfleet success as their dads.

"At the beginning of the series, they are both at a crossroads in their lives," explains Hampton. "That's something that propels them into this alternate universe where they are going to have to work through their deep-rooted problems in order to get home. The characters they encounter will also be directly related to some of the things they need to work through, but may have been avoiding back home."

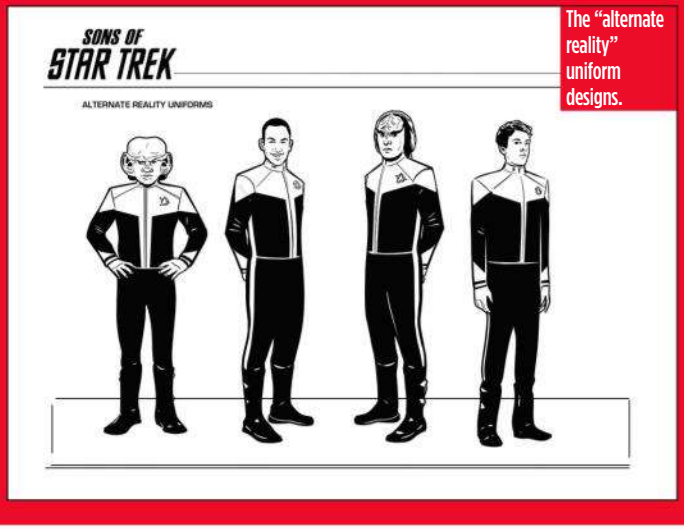
Serving as officers onboard the USS Burton, Jake and Alexander cross paths with the offspring of several other familiar faces. "That was my favourite part about developing the story, particularly because most of my main characters aren't in Starfleet in the main universe," says Hampton.

"It was fun to explore what that would look like if they did follow in their fathers' footsteps and what kind of lives they'd be living if they did. Aside from that, it was an absolute blast to piece together the crew for our ship too. I plucked people from all over *Star Trek*, and to this day I can't believe they let me use some of these characters. People are in for a surprise for sure!"

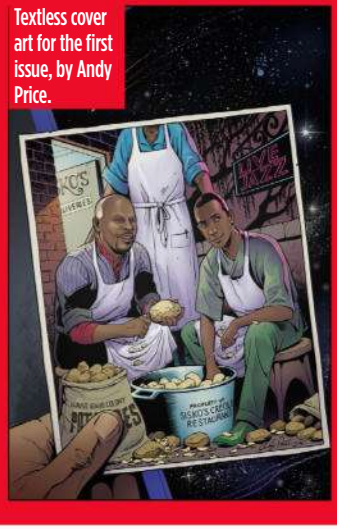
Stating that he was "in awe" of some of the design proofs, Hampton is enjoying working with artist Angel Hernández. "I'm a sucker for Starfleet uniforms and deltas, so my favourite part was seeing how those would look like in our alternate universe," he laughs.

"How we would keep it somewhat similar and recognisable, but also seeing how we could make it our own thing. And, of course, Angel knocked it out of the park! It's strange seeing characters like Jake and Alexander in Starfleet uniforms, but Angel makes it feel natural."

Star Trek: Sons Of Star Trek issue one is out on 13 March.



The "alternate reality" uniform designs.



Textless cover art for the first issue, by Andy Price.

SCI-FACT! **Four different actors have played Alexander on-screen (one as an adult version from the future), with a fifth seen in a photo.**

SCI-FACT! **After the Dark Knight's debut in March 1939's *Detective Comics* 27, the Joker first appeared in April 1940's *Batman* issue one.**

Share the gag with the classroom, Joker...

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

First Laugh

Chip Zdarsky reveals the secret origin of Batman's arch-enemy in **The Joker: Year One**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

IN THE WORKS since Chip Zdarsky started writing *Batman* in July 2022, *The Joker: Year One* shines new light on the origins of the Clown Prince of Crime.

"In a lot of ways, it's been in my head since my first page of *Batman*," Zdarsky tells Red Alert. "I always knew we were going to explore this period of Batman and Joker's history, right after his fateful acid bath. I just wasn't sure what form it was going to take."

Rather than a separate publication, the three-parter is serialised in the pages of *Batman* itself, beginning with issue 142. "The main reason is that this story is building on what we've been doing in the *Batman* title as there are ties to my previous book, *Batman: The Knight* and to the current Batman of Zur-En-Arrh storyline," explains Zdarsky, referring respectively to his 2022 maxi-series and the recent return of the Dark Knight's alternate personality.

"It's being revealed to Batman at the same time as it's happening to the readers. It's not a standalone story, though it can still be read as one. Also, Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli's original *Batman: Year One* was published in the *Batman* monthly series, so it felt right to continue that!"

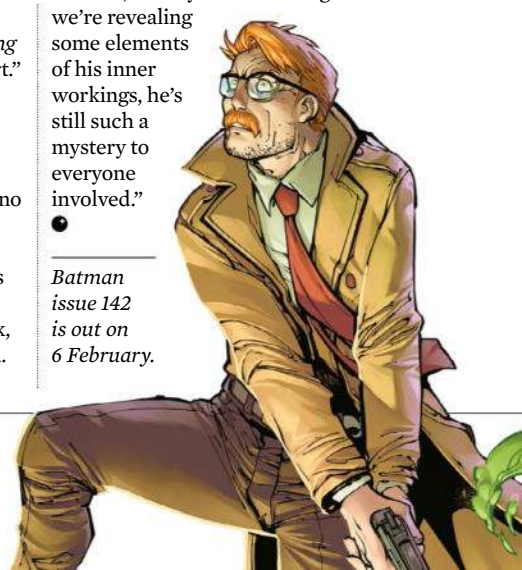
Zdarsky also delved into some more recent storylines. "Tom King and Mitch Gerads have just fleshed out that *Batman* issue one story in *Batman: The Brave And The Bold*, so I've mostly been keeping up with their take to make sure things line up with my story," he continues. "The other comics that I've been referencing a lot are Scott Snyder and Greg Capullo's *Zero Year* issues, as it's the continuity that I'm dancing around here. Beyond that, we obviously have nods to *The Killing Joke* in Giuseppe Camuncoli's art."

Art duties on the three issues are divided between Camuncoli and Stefano Nesi, who illustrate the main narrative, and Andrea Sorrentino. "Giuseppe and Stefano are handling the majority of the story, which is set during the formative Joker 'Year One'," says Zdarsky. "Giuseppe has a great clean and iconic look to his work, which nicely fits in to the period. Then Andrea is telling a Joker story set in the future that relates to the 'Year One' period. It's a dark and gritty time and he's incredibly good at giving it the bleak and creepy qualities that it needs."

With the Joker ranking as its leader, the Red Hood Gang plays a crucial part in what unfolds. "They play a big part in this, not only as a group trying to pick up the pieces after the Zero Year debacle, but also as an inspiration for other gangs in Gotham," teases Zdarsky. Describing him as "just incredibly fun to write" and "an id unleashed," Zdarsky has also enjoyed pitting the Joker against the Caped Crusader.

"He's a perfect contrast to Batman," he says. "Even though we're revealing some elements of his inner workings, he's still such a mystery to everyone involved." ●

Batman issue 142 is out on 6 February.



Season 15 is next up for the *Collection* treatment.

Cast and crew assembled for the Christmas premiere.

SFX

SPACE AND TIME

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF DOCTOR WHO

◆ The new series of *Doctor Who* has been confirmed to launch on BBC One and Disney+ in May.

◆ **Filming continues for series two, due for release in 2025.**

◆ Cast and crew attended the world premiere of "The Church On Ruby Road" at London's BFI on 11 December. Guests enjoyed a post-screening reception with live music, and Polaroids left behind by goblins.

◆ **Prior to the premiere, the cast and crew made a special appearance at the London Eye, where the landmark was lit up in the colours of the time vortex.**

◆ "The Goblin Song" by Murray Gold reached number one on the iTunes chart on day of release, also reaching number 12 in the official singles sales chart and number six in the official singles download chart. It also reached number four in the Official Big Top 40.

◆ **Updated figures, at time of going to press, have "The Star Beast" consolidated at 9.5 million viewers including catch-up. Overnights for "Wild Blue Yonder" were 4.83 million, with 7.14 million viewers consolidated over seven days. "The Giggle" scored 4.62 million overnight and 6.85 million consolidated over seven days. "The Church On Ruby Road" was the most-watched scripted show on Christmas Day, with 4.73 million viewers and 7.49 million consolidated over seven days. Global figures via Disney+ are not available.**

◆ "The Church On Ruby Road" is released as a novel, audiobook and Blu-ray this month. The book is written by Esmie Jikiemi-Pearson and narrated by Angela Wynter (Cherry Sunday).

◆ **The next release in Blu-ray series *The Collection* has been announced as season 15 – including new special effects on "Horror Of Fang Rock" and new commentaries from Tom Baker, alongside an extensive array of new and previously released bonus features. A standard edition of season 17 is also released in *The Collection* range this month.**

◆ Audiobook sets *The Invaders Collection* and *The Phaser Aliens & Other Stories,* are being released on 1 February and 7 March respectively. The first collects four Target novel readings, while the second features six stories from vintage *Doctor Who* annuals.

◆ **"The Celestial Toymaker" has been animated for release on Blu-ray and DVD, and is available for pre-order now.**

Millie Gibson and Ncuti Gatwa at the London Eye.

Doctor Who is on BBC One, iPlayer and Disney+ from May.

SCI-FACT! Showrunner Russell T Davies says that he named the lead goblin singer after the *Muppets* character Janice.

SCI-FACT! **Debuting in 2008's *Ultimate Origins* 5, the previous Ultimate Black Panther, T'Challa Udaku, was experimented on by Weapon X.**

Ultimate Black Panther designs, by Stefano Caselli.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Top Cat

T'Challa faces off against Moon Knight in the new **Ultimate Black Panther**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

SPINNING OUT OF last year's *Ultimate Invasion* and *Ultimate Universe*, Marvel is releasing a host of new *Ultimate* titles, beginning with January's *Ultimate Spider-Man*. *Ultimate X-Men* follows in March, while February sees the debut of *Ultimate Black Panther*, which according to writer Bryan Hill boasts the broadest canvas of them all.

"This world gives me the opportunity to take some bolder swings and, if nothing else, reboot the tone of the book into an epic," Hill tells Red Alert, while insisting that his lofty ambitions don't stem from "a desire to break free of the mythos" of the existing Earth-616 universe.

Variant cover art for issue one, by Karen Darboe

Hill has drawn inspiration from not only the diverse, nearly 60-year history of *Black Panther* comics and Ryan Coogler's two films, but also the "worldbuilding capacity" of Frank Herbert's *Dune* novels. "The *Black Panther* movies presented the character with an unforeseen dimension as Ryan Coogler's influences ranged from indie film to Paul Schrader's surrealist work on [1982 film] *Cat People*, so I took the gestalt collection of influences.

"As for *Dune*, it's a broad fictional world that engages history and present and future all at once. There's a spiritualism present, and I wanted that in Wakanda with the role of legacies, belief systems and prophecy and its implications."

Cryptically noting that "when one is in the land of [Jonathan] Hickman, one does what Hickman does," Hill won't be drawn on whether this Black Panther has anything in common with any previous *Ultimate* incarnation of the character, although despite some speculation to the contrary, he assures us that it is most definitely T'Challa under that mask.

"There's been some needless confusion over that, but that's definitely not something to hide from the fans," he adds. "It's him!"

With Ra and Khonshu – the twin forces that make up Moon Knight – invading Africa, Wakanda is forced to break from its traditionally isolationist policies and take its place on the world stage. Threatened with being overwhelmed, a couple of characters come to Black Panther's aid in *Ultimate Black Panther* issue three, in the shape of Killmonger and Storm, who in this new *Ultimate* universe have been refashioned as a pair of freedom fighters. Readers can also expect to see *Ultimate* versions of familiar characters like Shuri and Okoye.

Stating that Wakanda is "much more than that," Hill has enjoyed exploring the various aspects of the mythical African nation. "Wakanda represents a source of inspiration for a lot of people," he says. "It has deeper meaning than being just a fictional place. I need to honour that and serve it in the storytelling, and I intend to do that."

While Peach Momoko has provided designs for characters like Killmonger and Storm, Hill has also enjoyed working with artist Stefano Caselli. "He's a brilliant visual storyteller," he says. "He brings confidence and buttresses my own, as I know whatever I write, whatever I imagine, he'll top that in the execution."

Ultimate Black Panther issue one is out on 7 February.

SCI-FACT! **Richard Franklin also wrote a novel about Mike Yates, *The Killing Stone*, later retitled *Operation HATE*.**

NEW AUTHOR

GARETH BROWN

MEET THE CIVIL SERVANT BEHIND YA FANTASY *THE BOOK OF DOORS*

Tell us about your protagonist – what's her story?

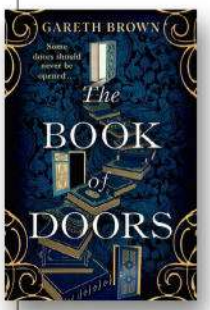
→ Cassie Andrews is an introverted young woman living a quiet life as a bookseller in New York City. One night her favourite customer gifts her an unusual book filled with strange writing. This is the Book of Doors, that can turn any door into every door. As you can imagine, wild adventures ensue!

Are there other magical books in the story?

→ There are. Each can bestow whoever possesses it with a special ability – to cause pain; to change your face; to create illusions and so on. There are dangerous people who covet them, particularly very powerful ones such as the Book of Doors.

How long did it take to write the book? Did it evolve much?

→ It was about three months, but I can type fast, which helps. I started with just the opening scene – everything else I made up as I went, so it evolved and changed hugely along the way.



Which authors are your inspirations?

→ I started writing because of Stephen King, and I love all those classic horror authors from the '80s and '90s. More recently I love thriller writers like Michael Connelly, Lee Child and Greg Iles – authors who can make you want to keep reading.

Any advice for budding novelists?

→ Read lots and write lots – it's the only way to learn. Just make sure everything you write is better than the last thing you wrote and you're on the right track. There's no shortcut for experience.

The Book Of Doors is out on 15 February, published by Bantam.

THE FINAL FRONTIER

RICHARD FRANKLIN 1936-2023

Remembering the '70s *Doctor Who* star

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

PART OF THE TIGHT-KNIT ensemble cast that made the Jon Pertwee era of *Doctor Who* so beloved, Richard Franklin played Captain Mike Yates for nine of the Time Lord's Earthbound adventures, battling everything from time-warped dinosaurs to killer daffodils.

Born in Marylebone, London, he could draw on genuine military experience for the role, having reached the rank of captain in Queen Victoria's Rifles during national service. An early stint at an advertising agency was followed by a career swerve as Franklin enrolled at RADA, graduating in 1965 to work in repertory theatre. He made his TV debut in a 1966 episode of *Dixon Of Dock Green* before winning a taste of small-screen fame as Joe Townsend in ITV soap *Crossroads*.

Mike Yates debuted as UNIT's second-in-command in season eight of *Doctor Who*, described in the original character outline as "a tough cheerful young soldier, very competent but a shade too easy-going and casual for the Brigadier's liking."

A potential romantic interest for incoming companion Jo Grant (Katy Manning) – an idea soon abandoned – Yates's idealism saw him betray UNIT in "Invasion Of The Dinosaurs", before a redemption in Pertwee's 1974 swansong "Planet Of The Spiders".

In later years Franklin enjoyed a long-running role as businessman Denis Rigg in *Emmerdale Farm* and notched up further genre credits as a Federation trooper in *Blake's 7* episode "Aftermath" and a Death Star engineer in *Rogue One*. Franklin never quite left *Who* behind, returning for anniversary cameos in "The Five Doctors" and "Dimensions In Time", staging *Recall UNIT* at the Edinburgh Fringe in 1984 and teaming with Tom Baker for the Nest Cottage audio adventures.

"The show hits a very basic truth – a fight of good against evil," said Franklin in 1984. "I think it touches a very basic chord, really."

Richard Franklin pictured in 2013.

PAULA HAMMOND / ALAMY

IAN GIBSON 1946-2023

British comics artist known for *Robo-Hunter*, *Judge Dredd* and *The Ballad Of Halo Jones*.

JOHN M BURNS 1938-2023

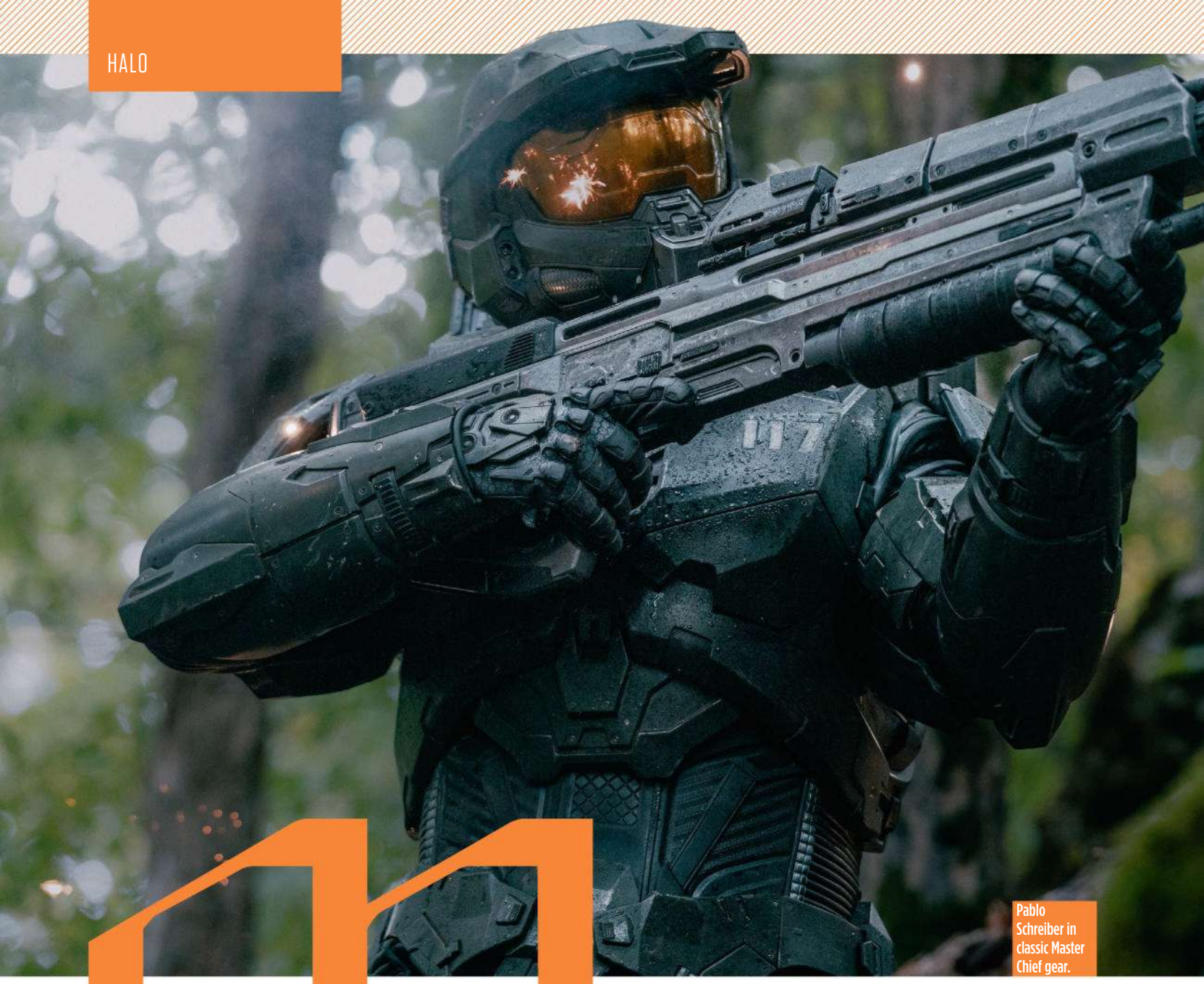
British comics artist known for *UFO*, *The Tomorrow People* and *Nikolai Dante*.

WE'RE JUST GETTING STARTED

MASTER CHIEF'S BACK FOR ANOTHER ROUND WITH THE COVENANT IN HALO – BUT FIRST HE NEEDS TO DEAL WITH A FEW ONLINE TROLLS...

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

117



Pablo Schreiber in classic Master Chief gear.

MASTER CHIEF'S BATTLE-HARDENED, straight-talking persona must be wearing off on Pablo Schreiber, because the actor – who plays the iconic Spartan warrior in Paramount's *Halo* series – does not mince words. For instance, when asked about the first season's infamous sex scene between Chief, aka John-117, and the undercover Covenant agent Makee, he firmly criticises the narrative decision.

"The decision to make the connection between Makee and John a romantic connection was a huge mistake," he tells *SFX*. "I felt it was a huge mistake at the time and I argued against it and fought against it. But I am who I am. I don't write the scripts. I only give my opinion. It wasn't listened to."

He similarly makes his feelings known about fans who were angered when, during the pilot episode, Chief removed his helmet – something that's never happened in the *Halo* game series, despite there being six mainline entries.

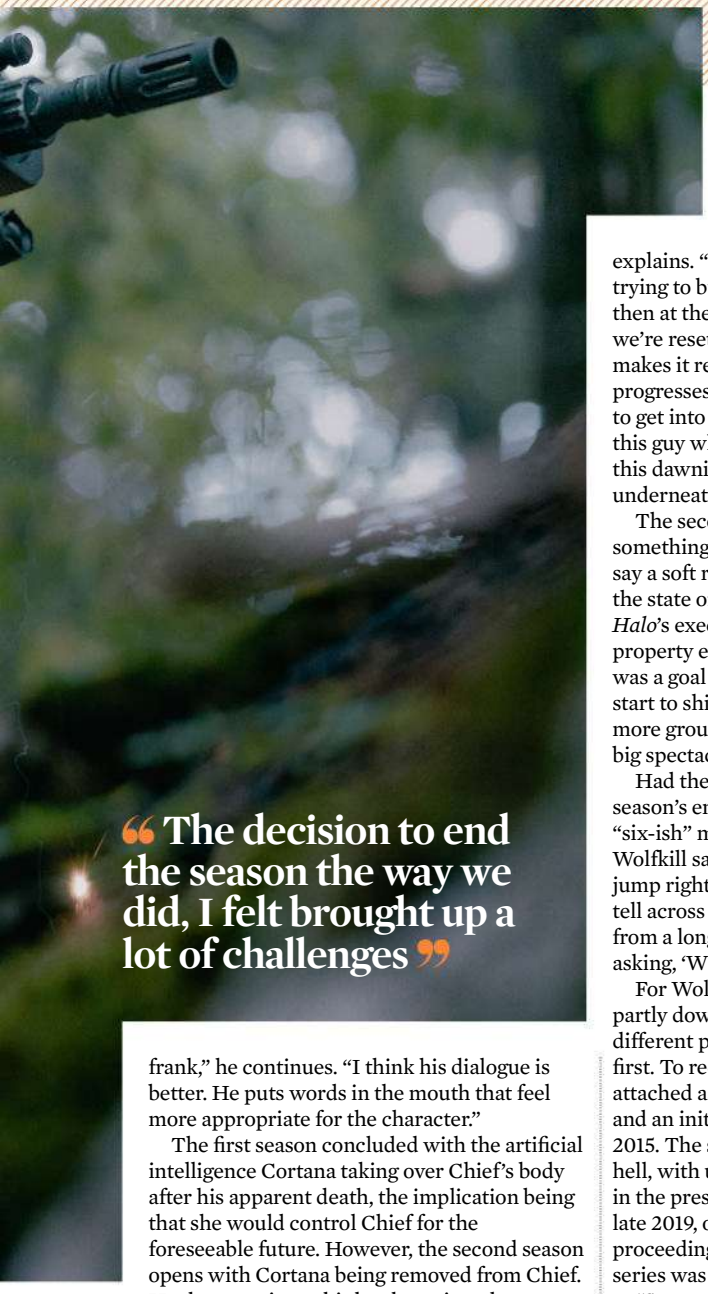
"People who don't feel the helmet was necessary to come off, they're at such an early conception of what the show could be," he says. "In order to examine the discrepancy between these two versions of the character [Chief and John-117], you can't tell that story without taking the helmet off. If you don't agree with the helmet coming off in the show, you don't like our show. So there's no point discussing it."

Even the visuals of the first season are not beyond reproach. "I felt it got lost in some gloss. The visuals, for me, just didn't look as high-end, as classy, as cinematic as they could have been." And as for the season's final moments? "The decision to end the season the way we did, I felt brought up a lot of challenges. Where do you go with that?"

Luckily, a lot has changed between seasons. David Wiener – previously showrunner on *Brave New World* and co-executive producer on *Fear The Walking Dead* – has come aboard to command *Halo*'s second season, and the differences are clear from the outset.

The opening episode is strikingly gritty, feeling more akin to *Star Wars*' *Andor* than *Ahsoka*, and tonally darker and more mature than anything in the first season.

"The tonal shift just feels so much more appropriate for the franchise," Schreiber says. "It's darker, it's more dangerous, all of the stunt and action sequences put you into the battle and inside the fighting. To me, it's a much more effective way to deal with the show... I think [Wiener] is just a more gifted writer, to be quite



> **“The decision to end the season the way we did, I felt brought up a lot of challenges”**

frank,” he continues. “I think his dialogue is better. He puts words in the mouth that feel more appropriate for the character.”

The first season concluded with the artificial intelligence Cortana taking over Chief’s body after his apparent death, the implication being that she would control Chief for the foreseeable future. However, the second season opens with Cortana being removed from Chief. He then continues his battle against the Covenant, although he suffers some significant PTSD from the whole experience.

“That was a decision that David made in wanting to reset the relationship with Cortana; he wanted to start with having them apart, so he could bring them back together,” Schreiber explains. “We spent the entire [first] season trying to build character development, and then at the end pulled the rug out and said, ‘No, we’re resetting back to zero.’ And that dynamic makes it really hard to make television that progresses. The whole point of the series was to get into the mindset of this split character, this guy who lives as Master Chief but also has this dawning realisation of John, who is underneath.”

The second season, then, sounds like something of a readjustment. “I don’t want to say a soft reboot, but there was intent to reset the state of the world,” Kiki Wolfkill, one of *Halo*’s executive producers and the head of property expansion at Microsoft, tells *SFX*. “It was a goal to do a few things. One was really to start to shift tonally to a place that was a little more grounded and grittier, but still with the big spectacle of *Halo* and sci-fi.”

Had they continued directly on from the first season’s ending, rather than implementing a “six-ish” month time-jump between seasons, Wolfkill says they wouldn’t have been able to jump right in and tell the story they wanted to tell across eight episodes. “It’s about coming from a long-term storytelling perspective, and asking, ‘Where’s the right place to start from?’”

For Wolfkill, the change in approach was partly down to the second season having a very different production period compared to the first. To recap: Steven Spielberg was first attached as an executive producer back in 2013, and an initial release date was established for 2015. The series then entered development hell, with updates only sporadically appearing in the press, until filming finally commenced in late 2019, only for the pandemic to halt proceedings, which restarted in 2021. The series was finally released a year later.

“Season two, we were able to be much more focused-in,” she says. “Like with game development, you come out of your first game and you have a laundry list of things that you would approach differently or that didn’t quite hit the mark. There were very specific things we knew we wanted to do with season two, and frankly, bringing in a new showrunner let us do that in a more extreme way than we would have if we were just continuing on with season one. We felt like we needed to be brave with it.

Cristina Rodlo joins the cast as Cpl Talia Perez.

Joseph Morgan plays James Ackerson.

“Tone was something that was there from the beginning. So that was our North Star, as was getting some really strong characterisation and dialogue this season. A lot of season one was, ‘How do we figure out how to make a show of the scope and scale? And how do we bring the *Halo* universe to life?’ We learned all of those great lessons. Then it was about how we focus on the nuance of what we want that universe and story to feel like.”

It would be easy to assume that the fan response to the first season played a role in the series’ revamp. “I don’t spend a lot of energy worrying about that stuff, because it’s completely beyond my control,” Schreiber says, bluntly. Wolfkill, though, is not quite as dismissive.

“It’s such a complex topic. We probably had a longer list of things we wanted to do, and criticisms, coming out of season one than all of the online feedback put together. That’s just the job of creating the experience. It’s never exactly the thing that you want, there’s always more you want to do and there’s always more you want to do better.

“That said, that feedback is really important. What’s always a challenge is: how do you separate some of the emotional noise from the critiques and constructive feedback that’s important to take? It can be really demoralising. It’s hard when you’ve watched thousands of people put so much into a project and have it so easily dismissed. But things that were controversial in season one, it was not a →

“Can I take the helmet off again? Oh go on.”

surprise that they were controversial and it was a very easy decision not to do some things again... some things that became memes."

There's one moment in particular that comes to mind: when John-117 removes his clothes and bares his behind. The result was an unflattering nickname: Master Cheeks. It was a risky move to show one of gaming's most revered characters in a new light.

"It was always a desire to give the people who know the *Halo* universe something different, and that inherently meant taking risks," Wolfkill says. "There are things like 'Master Cheeks' where I will say, admittedly, it was a blind spot for me how strong the reaction would be.

"At the end of the day, taking a risk like that again is more about, do we need it to support the story? At the end of the day, does 'Master Cheeks' need to happen again to support the story? Probably not. That's not the kind of risk that's worth taking."

ARMOUR WARS

Season two will go some way to rectify a few of the risks taken that went wrong, including Schreiber's biggest bugbear, Chief's romance with Makee – a character who has a unique connection to Chief. They're both "Blessed Ones" who can interact with the alien artefacts known as Keystones.

"That connection was far more interesting as a deeply fraternal sister/brother – they're the same, and it could have been much more interesting without sex," he says. "There is some good, high-quality narrative risk-taking in the second season. And there's narrative risk-taking that doesn't make any sense.

"That's my opinion on that one. But again, we're weaving the web that we're weaving. David had to deal with those decisions that were made in the first season, and I think he deals with them pretty well. I like the nature of where the John/Makee story goes. It's certainly not romantic any more."

Whatever past choices that he may disagree with, Schreiber is emphatically positive about what's to come. "There's no question the second season is far stronger than the first," he says. "I will stake my reputation on that. It's absolutely improved. The art director who came on-board, James Foster, is fantastic. He created a visual world that just makes a lot more sense. It's so beautiful, incredibly cinematic. And the dialogue is better. It's just a better season, period."

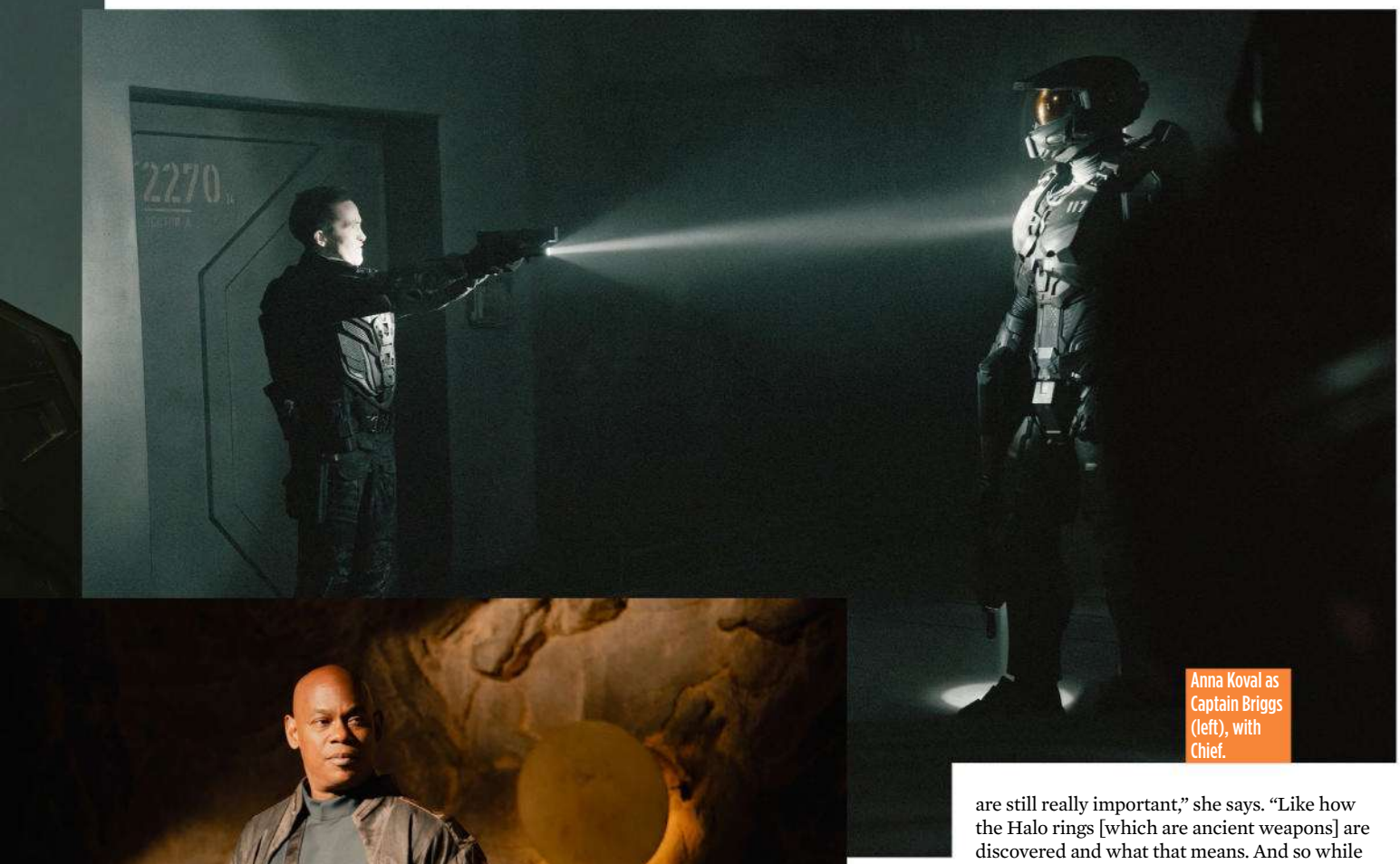
Wolfkill points to how the scale has grown, with filming taking place in Slovenia, Italy and Iceland. "The shooting style too, even in some of the action moments, it feels like you're really in there," she says. "There's an intensity that comes with that, the highs and lows. I'm really excited to give you something that you feel viscerally, as well as a great story."

The story begins again with Chief, along with his team of Spartans, protecting a planet from being "glassed" by the villainous Covenant. Chief feels like they've been put on "babysitting" duty, as Schreiber puts it, and that it's not work worthy of Spartans. "I love the camaraderie of John and his teammates," he says. "We start at a place where everybody is quite disenchanted, the whole team is questioning him, nobody's happy. This season, other characters get their moments to shine, specifically the other Spartans, Riz and Kai and Vannak – you really start to get to know them."

One of their biggest adversaries isn't the Covenant, though, but bureaucracy within the UNSC (United Nations Space Command), which protects mankind from alien threats. Enter James Ackerson, played by *The Vampire Diaries*' Joseph Morgan, who takes over command of the Spartan programme from its now-missing originator Halsey. He's not

Pablo Schreiber (Master Chief) has thoughts.

"It feels like there's a long arc of multiple seasons that we would love to be able to tell"



Anna Koval as Captain Briggs (left), with Chief.

Bokeem Woodbine is the privateer Soren-066.

exactly a hit with Chief's team. "The antagonistic relationship is just a fun one to play," Schreiber says. "There's a mistrust of John that goes on in the first few episodes. Is he losing it?"

The lack of confidence in Chief comes partly from his history with Makee. Also, in the opening episode, his life is spared by a member of the Covenant wearing Arbiter armour. Now, anyone who has played *Halo 2* will know the Arbiter, a playable character voiced by Keith David – but don't get too excited just yet. "He is an Arbiter," Wolfkill says, "Arbiter being a title... I've probably just told you more than I was supposed to. It's possible you saw Arbiter armour."

Whether this is the Arbiter of the games or another one altogether, the character is an interesting, conflicted one: the role of Arbiter is bestowed by the Covenant's leadership on disgraced commanders so that they can atone for past failures. They are intended to die in the line of duty. "It's something of a sacrificial role, but what it does is create this beautiful foil, as it did in the games, and also a viewpoint into some of the zealotry of the Covenant," Wolfkill continues. "It's important for us to have a good foil for the Master Chief."

Considering that Chief doesn't meet the Arbiter in the games until *Halo 2*, and the first season told a story from before the first *Halo*, there appear to be a few significant changes being made to the timeline. The situation has previously been likened to the way the Marvel movies take inspiration from the source material, but the story changes somewhat, and Wolfkill agrees to a point.

"We talk about the *Halo* Silver Timeline [aka the TV timeline] as an alternate history, but the big things that happen in the [game] universe are still really important," she says. "Like how the Halo rings [which are ancient weapons] are discovered and what that means. And so while we may look at an event like the Fall of Reach [in which the Covenant defeat the UNSC and destroy the planet Reach] differently, the impact is still the same.

"The Covenant is one step away from finding Earth, humanity is taking nearly its last stand, what the Covenant wants becomes more clear, and the race to get to the Halo ring is more dire."

How many events from the games will make their way into the second season remains to be seen. It's unclear whether the Fall of Reach is one of them, and there's no word on a third-season renewal. But whatever happens, there's a whole lot more *Halo* to explore.

"We have so many stories to tell," Wolfkill says. "It feels like there's a long arc of multiple seasons that we would love to be able to tell."

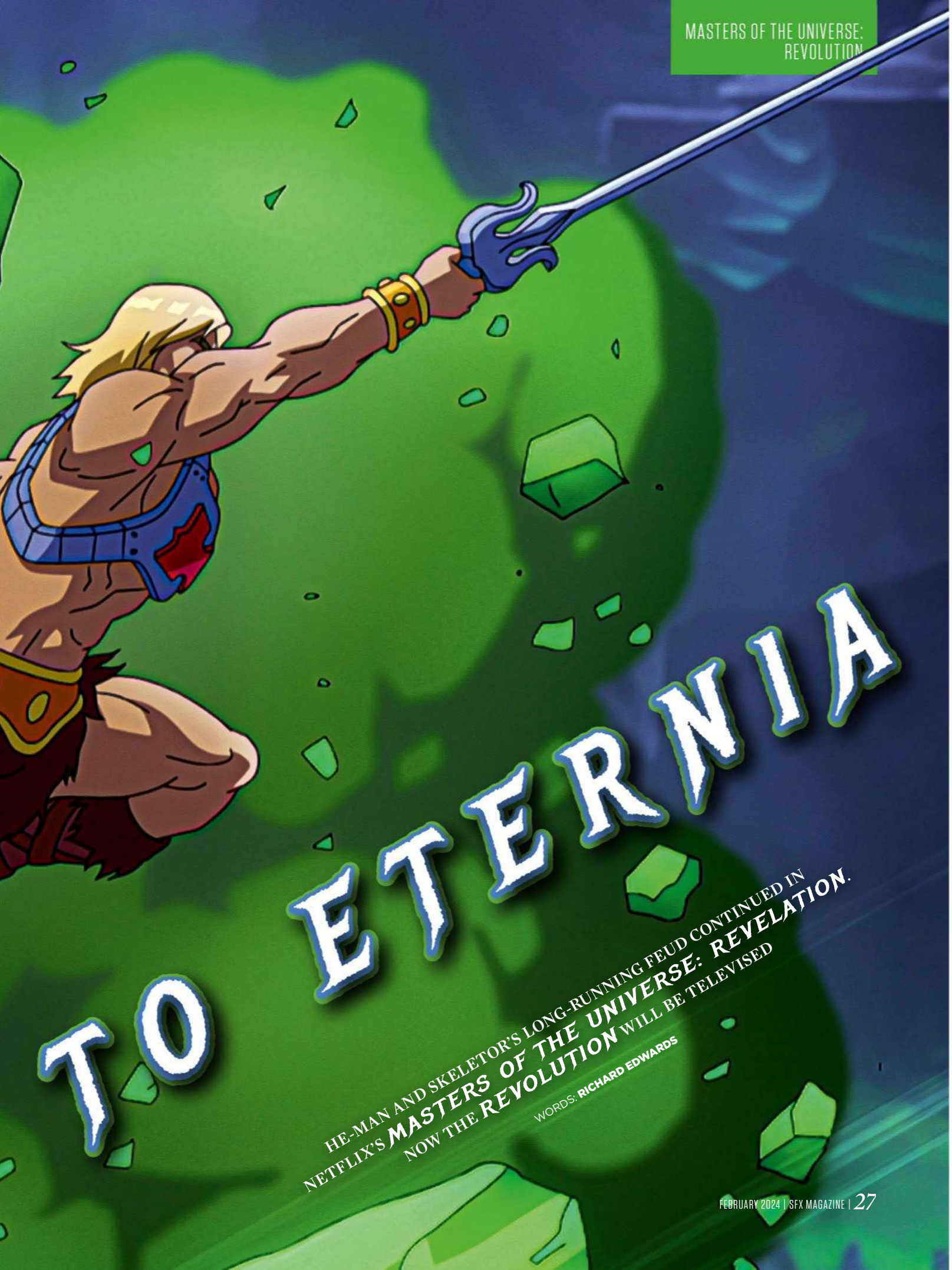
The outspoken Schreiber concurs: "The depth and mystery of the *Halo* lore is so incredible. It is this vast resource that you could go on with forever. It could expand itself into so many different spin-offs. I love doing it. It's a Herculean challenge, but it's one that I really, really am proud to be a part of.

"As long as people are interested in doing it, I'm here and happy to do it. It feels like a worthy challenge, and I love a big challenge. I would play in this world for as long as anybody was interested in having me."

Spoken like a true Spartan.

Halo is on Paramount+ from 8 February.

FROM HERE



TO ETERNIA

HE-MAN AND SKELETOR'S LONG-RUNNING FEUD CONTINUED IN NETFLIX'S *MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE: REVELATION*. NOW THE *REVOLUTION* WILL BE TELEVISED

WORDS: **RICHARD EDWARDS**

> "We really went out of our way to honour what it was that people loved about MOTU"

BY THE POWER OF GRAYSKULL! In 2021, Kevin Smith (*Clerks* creator, professional geek and newly appointed guardian of the secrets of Castle Grayskull) held aloft his magic sword and introduced the world to a He-Man we'd never seen before.

Masters Of The Universe: Revelation was packed full of heroes and villains who'd populated many a toybox back in the '80s – most of them still wearing those strange, Conan-esque fluffy pants that were the fashion at the time – but the new Netflix series also tapped into emotional depths previously unseen in Eternia.

While *Revelation* was a direct follow-up to the events of the popular Filmation cartoon – still arguably the most successful toy commercial of all time – Smith's paymasters at Netflix and toy manufacturer Mattel briefed their showrunner to treat the ongoing feud between He-Man and Skeletor "like Shakespeare".

With harder-edged, anime-influenced visuals and a story that unfolded over a long, complex arc, it was targeted squarely at the now 40-something kids who'd grown up watching the adventures of the most powerful man in the universe on TV. And this time, each episode wasn't wrapped up with a cheesy moral.

LIGHT AND DARK

It felt like a match made in Preternia (the franchise's answer to Heaven), but not everybody was happy. Indeed, despite *Revelation* picking up a 93% fresh rating from critics on Rotten Tomatoes, winning over the more negative corners of the fanbase turned out to be a stretch, even for the most powerful man in the universe.

"[The increased character complexity] is something that we've seen the fanbase either react incredibly positively towards or reject," says Ted Biaselli, a lifelong *MOTU* fan who now gets to call the shots as director of original series at Netflix. "There are people who just want to go back to the simplicity, and that's fine. I don't think there's anything wrong with wanting your heroes and villains to be the good guy and the bad guy, and not really burden them with the complexities of adulthood.

"Some people just wanted to go back and relive the nostalgia, but that just wasn't what the approach for this show was. What we wanted to do is give these characters real emotions and foibles, and challenge them."

For some, the fact that He-Man was absent (presumed dead) for much of the 10-episode run, with the focus shifting instead to Teela, the former captain of Eternia's Royal Guard, was also seen as an issue. "I know there are people that went after *Revelation* for putting Teela first or whatever, but we didn't," Smith tells *SFX*. "Teela was as much a part of the story as she's always been a part of the story. And I thought it would be a cool aspect of storytelling to remove the centre of our universe for a few episodes and then bring him back.

"That wasn't me going, 'Let's break this franchise!' by any stretch of the imagination. People who wanted to attack the show were like, 'They killed He-Man!', but it wasn't as if Mattel or Netflix were saying, 'Here man, go kill a franchise for us. That's why we brought you here!' Naturally, He-Man was always going to come back.

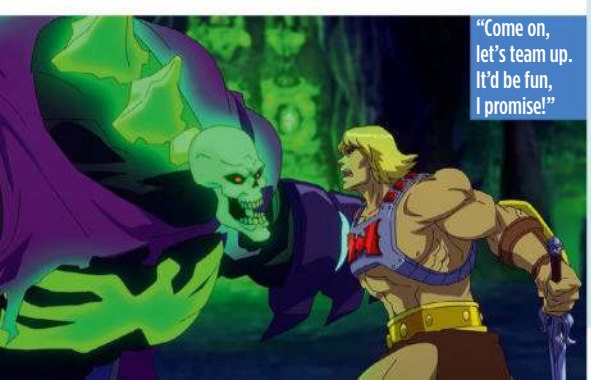
"Everything we did in He-Man's absence and when we brought him back still tied in heavily with the lore," Smith continues. "I'm a person who has enjoyed a franchise or two in his lifetime, and naturally I enjoy it when they respect the things that have gone before. We really went out of our way to honour what it was that people loved about *MOTU*. Everybody involved had skin in the game as to whether this would be a reinvention of the franchise or a spiritual continuation of the franchise. We were all in the latter camp."

The story continues in *Masters Of The Universe: Revolution*, a follow-up which, if Smith, Biaselli and Rob David, vice president of content creative at Mattel Television get their way, will be the middle act of an Eternian trilogy. Smith says the only significant change they've made from *Revelation* is putting all five episodes out in one go – the show's first run went out in two separate blocks – but otherwise the new season picks up where its predecessor left off.

That means that pretty much everybody in Eternia knows that He-Man is really Prince

"Probably about time to get a bigger sword..."

Adam faces off against Richard Osman.



"Come on, let's team up. It'd be fun, I promise!"

Adam, a secret previously shared by just Cringer, Man-at-Arms, the Sorceress and Orko, and that Teela has inherited her late mother's mantle as the all-powerful Sorceress of Castle Grayskull. Adam, in particular, will have big choices to make in *Revolution* when he's asked to take on additional duties in the royal court, meaning that he might not have quite as much time to moonlight as Eternia's champion.

"This is a story that's going to explore what it means to be He-Man when a new responsibility falls on Adam," explains Biaselli. "I think it's really interesting to explore what it's like when, as an adult, you know what you want to do, and your parents also have expectations for you. How do you reconcile with that? We do it with an eye towards making sure fans know that He-Man is in three-and-a-half or four out of the five episodes. He *is* He-Man in the show!"

Revelation also hinted that the relationship between Adam and Teela had the potential to become more than platonic. That romantic spark won't be forgotten in *Revolution*, even though their new careers might disrupt their work-life balance. "In many ways, this is a coming of age story for Adam and Teela – and, in a twisted way, for Skeletor, too," says Rob David. "It's like the position we all face growing up at some point, when it's our turn to step into some position that the previous generation had, and trying to decide what kind of world we want to build together.

"Also, for me, it's really important to isolate what the power of Castle Grayskull means to everybody. For a character like Skeletor it really means legitimacy, but for Adam, and I think for Teela, too, it represents family and it represents love. So linking their relationship with what the power of Grayskull means is the bedrock of not just the franchise but everything we're trying to do with *Revolution*."

But beyond all that, and dealing with the destruction of Preternia and the afterlife – →

Oh do put a shirt on mate, it's not big or clever.

"I felt like, 'Oh my god! We left them without a heaven!' Of all the things that I was charged with on the internet, nobody mentioned that one, but to me it was the most irresponsible!" laughs Smith – *Revolution* will get back to the squabble that's been driving *MOTU* since day one: the rivalry between He-Man and his bony nemesis, Skeletor.

Having finally got to fulfil a lifelong dream by wielding the famous Sword of Power, Skeletor ended the season with a technological make-over, getting some Borg-like technological upgrades to become the mechanised Skeletek. That doesn't mean, however, that his core values – world domination, eliminating He-Man – have significantly altered.

"One of the things we definitely wanted to hit even more in *Revolution* is the conflict between He-Man and Skeletor," David explains. "We understood that there was a need to really get into it more quickly. *Revelation* got there for sure, but it was more like this slow burn, rekindling a narrative that hadn't been told for decades. Now we wanted to *really* deliver on that He-Man/Skeletor mash-up and

"I had moderated a panel or two with Mr Shatner, so he's weaved in and out of my life"

dive deeper into both characters. Their story, individually and collectively, is the beating heart of this story."

But Skeletor won't just have He-Man on his list of enemies. As hinted by *Revelation*'s finale, his old mentor Hordak – traditionally the enemy of He-Man's twin sister She-Ra (the rights to whom are, sadly, unavailable to *Masters Of The Universe*) – is back in town, and there's no love lost between them.

"Hordak's the cosmic vampire," says David. "He is the manipulator, the grandmaster of cosmic chess. He is just an amazing foil who kind of lines up everybody's individual arcs – all of the different themes either cross through him or are embodied by him in such a delightful, deliciously evil way."

"Getting Keith David to play Hordak was just magnificent," adds Biaselli. "I mean, talk about Shakespeare. He brings it to every line!"

Genre veteran David (whose impressive CV includes *The Thing* and *Pitch Black*) isn't the only high-profile new recruit to a voice cast that already boasts Luke Skywalker himself, Mark Hamill (as Skeletor), and *Game Of Thrones* vets Lena Headey (as Evil-Lyn) and Liam Cunningham (as Man-at-Arms). *Supergirl*'s Melissa Benoist (who's married to He-Man/Prince Adam actor Chris Wood in real life) takes over from Sarah Michelle Gellar as Teela, and guest stars don't come much bigger than Captain Kirk himself. Unfortunately, if we told you who William Shatner is playing in *Revolution* we'd be thrown in one of Castle Grayskull's dungeons with only an Orlax for company. But we *can* say that he has a significant role and that Smith relished the opportunity to work with a sci-fi legend.

"I had moderated a panel or two with Mr Shatner, so he's weaved in and out of my life. Or rather, I should say I've weaved in and out of his life!" says Smith. "When we were talking about casting the role, his was the first name that came up. I said, 'If we do this, then Captain Kirk and Luke Skywalker will act opposite each other. Like, we'll have them actually chewing the scenery around each other.' And for an old-school pop culture junkie from the '70s like myself, that would be worth the journey alone.

"The great William Shatner is 92 years old," he adds, "and when one thinks of 92-year-olds, you don't think of somebody who drives

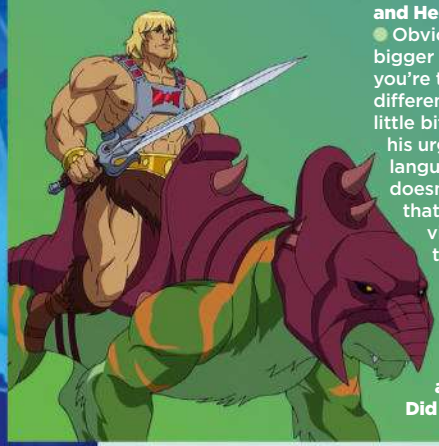
Teela is now played by Melissa Benoist...

...while Orko and Andra make a return too.

BEING HE-MAN

What's it like playing the most powerful man in the universe? Chris Wood knows the answer

You're playing a truly iconic character. How does it feel shouting "By the power of Grayskull!" – and meaning it?
It's got to be up there with the top few greatest moments of my career so far. I mean, this is not just iconic for the series, this is pop culture iconicism. That line surpasses the property in terms of how well known it is, and yeah, it feels amazing.



Do you approach playing Adam and He-Man differently?
Obviously He-Man is a much bigger guy than Adam, and when you're that big I guess you have different concerns. Adam is a little bit higher in my register, and his urgency kind of pushes the language forward, because he doesn't have that stoic calm that He-Man has. He-Man is all visceral power and he's got that broad chest, so the voice drops down as low as my register can handle.

There's more romance between He-Man/Adam and Teela in *Revolution*. Did you enjoy exploring that side of the character?
Oh, it's great, and getting my wife [Melissa Benoist, who's taken over from Sarah Michelle Gellar as Teela] to join the season made it even more fun. I think adding the romance package in and then having a sort of pay-off in *Revolution* was essential. They really stuck the landing for me.

Do you think He-Man can exist without Skeletor as the yin to his yang?
I feel like his answer would probably be that he doesn't need Skeletor, and he would love to destroy him, and the evil that he's bringing to Eternia. But in reality I think that He-Man needs his call to action as much as Skeletor needs his call to destruction. We've seen Adam without the sword, and he is always like a lost puppy, right? He needs that balance.

themselves around and then rushes things along. Bill was the guy who pulled up in his own car, and reminded us that he didn't have all the time in the world. He'd be like, 'Let's get this moving. I'm 92, I could go at any moment, let's start recording. My time is more precious than yours!' It's all tongue-in-cheek but also very real at the same time. It was absolute bliss."

There's no denying that, with its unlikely blend of science fiction and high fantasy, *Masters Of The Universe* is seriously, gloriously odd. Indeed, as Rob David admits: "I say this with complete reverence and fannish love, but *MOTU* is *really* weird. Weird in a great way. It's this squeezy stew cocktail. Pick your metaphor of everything you ever loved or will love thrown in together and stirred into something that is uniquely itself."

That bizarre quality might just owe something to the franchise's origins as a toy range. Designed to bag Mattel a slice of the post-*Star Wars* action-figure market in the early '80s, *MOTU* toys were packaged with mini-comics that helped establish Eternian lore. They subsequently begat the aforementioned Filmation cartoon, a Dolph Lundgren-starring movie, various other animated series, DC Comics and more. "There are so many different canons of *MOTU*," Biaselli points out, "and none of them have a lot of narrative overlap. There are similarities, but none of them are the same canon."

But what really separates *MOTU* from the likes of *Star Wars* is that unashamedly ridiculous characters who originated as memorable toys are frequently immortalised on screen. Where else would you expect to encounter Snout Spout (a guy who squirts water from his elephant head) and Rio Blast (a cybernetic, projectile-shooting cowboy) joining Stinkor (a big skunk) and Buzz-Off (a bee-man) in the battle for a planet's soul?

"That's part of the fun of it!" laughs Biaselli. "It's about taking a guy with a giant robot elephant head, and making sure that when he's on screen, he's still a guy with a giant robot elephant head who puts out fires with water from his trunk.

"But that doesn't negate the interpersonal dynamics of the show, and we have fun striking that balance. It is hard, but what made the Marvel Cinematic Universe work is finding and delivering on the stakes, but never taking the character so seriously that they become burdens on the story. It's about injecting the right amount of humour and self-deprecation at the right time to keep the audience engaged."

If all goes to plan, *Revelation* and *Revolution* could be just the beginning of *MOTU*'s screen resurrection, especially now that the all-conquering *Barbie* has made Mattel one of the hottest properties in Hollywood. David says a long-awaited big-screen He-Man is still in the works – "There's no shortage of people who understand the potential of a movie like that and what it can do for the brand" – and the more kid-focused CG series *He-Man And The Masters Of The Universe* is already streaming on Netflix. There's also no reason that numerous incarnations of the franchise can't exist side-by-side.

"In the comic books we had a room inside Castle Grayskull that's full of doors, and every door leads to a different Grayskull in a different reality," David explains. "All the multiversal realms of Eternia, including the CG animated show for kids, are just a doorway away.

"The joy of having a myth like *MOTU* that has spoken to so many generations is it's like jazz, being able to do variations on the theme. They're all inherently *MOTU*, they all have the same resonance and thematics, but they're told a whole different way. It's the greatest playdate any of us has had in this business."

Masters Of The Universe: Revolution is on Netflix from 25 January.

WILL NETFLIX'S AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER LIVE ACTION SERIES CAPTURE THE MAGIC OF THE ORIGINAL? SHOWRUNNER ALBERT KIM MAKES THE CASE FOR WHY IT WILL BE ENDING

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

Gordon Cormier as Aang.

EVER SINCE NETFLIX announced in 2018 that they were making a "reimagined" live-action adaptation of the animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, fans have been stressing out that their beloved fantasy series was going to get done dirty... again.

In its two decades of existence, animation has remained the safe haven of Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko's critically acclaimed, award-winning original fantasy series. It was created for Nickelodeon, where it became a huge hit with teens and adults, and ran for three seasons (2005–2008). Fusing Asian-inspired ancient lore with epic, elemental-based world-building and stellar characters, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* became an instant classic, one which continues to generate fresh waves of fans via streaming.

EXIT STRATEGY

But attempts to adapt the animated series to live action have been bumpy, to say the least. First there was M Night Shyamalan's 2010 big-budget feature *The Last Airbender*, which rejected the input of DiMartino and Konietzko, and whitewashed the casting of many Asian characters. The resulting film suffered greatly for those choices, landing like a lead balloon with the fandom.

Now there's Netflix's *Avatar: The Last Airbender* series, which originally boasted DiMartino and Konietzko as the showrunners, until they left the project in June 2020. That move prompted a collective gasp from the fandom, who are now waiting with bated breath for the series premiere. The man who now holds the fate of the series in his hands is executive producer/showrunner Albert Kim (*Sleepy Hollow*). A veteran genre storyteller, Kim was already part of the series development team when DiMartino and Konietzko hit a personal brick wall with Netflix and made their exit.

Kim tells *SFX* that when he was offered the reins of the show, he had to weigh that decision as both a long-time fan of the animated series, and as one of the architects who had worked closely with the creators to faithfully bring this version to life. "There was a moment where I stepped back to think, 'What is this going to look like without them involved?'" he says candidly. "I felt very confident in the direction that we had charted. Netflix was also very enthusiastic about where we were going with everything, so it felt organic to continue with the show, even after they left. But it wasn't easy.

> **"You want these characters to actually be played by actual Asian and indigenous actors"**

"There definitely was a moment of like, 'Wow, it's gonna be tough,'" Kim admits. "I would have loved to have them as people I could talk to and consult, and collaborate with. But again, that was a personal decision on their part. After that happened, it was just about moving forward as best we could, and what we felt was best for the project."

Luckily, Kim had enough overlap time with DiMartino and Konietzko to pick their brains about their intentions for this iteration – and, well, to just geek out with them about their world. "I was really thrilled to ask them everything, from even outside of what the show's going to be about, and just my own personal interests having followed the show for so long," Kim says of their talks together. "It was a *blast* being able to do that. And then we started to talk about what the show should be and could be."

Kim says they were very much on the same page about how to give the story a new dimension by bringing it into the live action realm. "We talked a lot about what that meant, and what it meant to turn cartoon characters into flesh and blood ones."

Unlike the movie version, representation was a front and centre issue for the series. "You want these characters to actually be played by actual Asian and indigenous actors, and that wasn't a battle at all," Kim says. "They were on board, I was and Netflix was.

"It seems like a small thing, but it's really not," Kim continues, "It's often easy to gloss over animation because animated features are a little bit simplified, so sometimes it's a little hard to tell what the ethnicity of some characters are. The world they created is very clearly one rooted in Asian culture and indigenous culture, so it was important to all of us to make sure that was represented faithfully in the live action version. It takes on a much greater weight when you have live action actors playing those roles."

Something animated projects often don't have to stress over is casting actors who are fully age-appropriate. Voice acting can hide a lot when it comes to older actors playing younger characters, which is not a luxury

Maria Zhang as Suki, Tamlyn Tomita as Mayor Yukari.

Paul Sun-Hyung Lee plays Iroh.

afforded to live action. *Avatar: The Last Airbender*'s hero is 12-year-old Aang, the last of his kind who can "bend" the four elements of water, earth, fire and air. When he's unfrozen to help save the world from the onslaught of the Fire Nation, Aang finds age-adjacent allies in waterbender Katara and her brother, Sokka.

Asking kids to shoulder the success of a live action series is always a precarious scenario because of the inherent pressure and the production's need to get fantastic performances out of them to sell the authenticity.

Because of that, Kim says going into casting was daunting. "I remember having a conversation with Netflix, saying, 'For this show to work and for us to do everything that I've talked about in feeling true to the spirit, these actors have to be either exactly the same age, or very close to the actors from the original series,'" he says. "Aang has to be 12, and we had to hit the 14 to 15 range for Katara, and so on. We knew that that was going to be an incredible challenge, to find actors of that age

Sebastian Amoruso as Jet.

Arden Cho as June: well moody, innit.

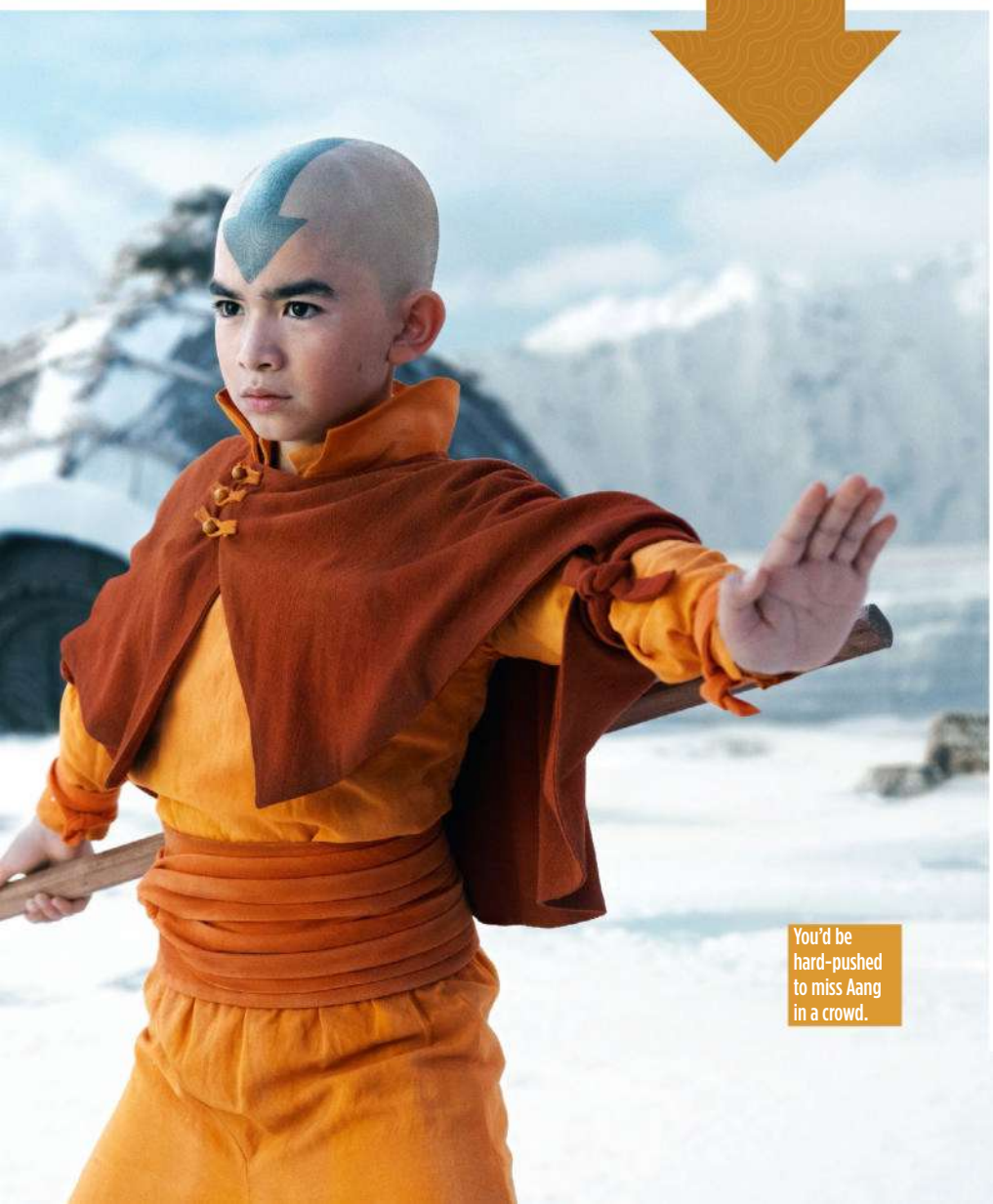
– and not only that, in the ethnicities we're talking about – who could also handle the performance burden, because this is a *really* emotional story. They have to be able to convey a lot of deep emotion, as well as humour and physical activity. So it was pretty scary going in."

But, Kim says, the process ended up being nothing short of miraculous, with them finding Gordon Cormier as Aang, Kiawentiio as Katara, Ian Ousley as Sokka and Dallas Liu as the temperamental antagonist, Prince Zuko. "All of us on the producing side and Netflix were just stunned," Kim says. "We were like, 'Oh my god, Gordon *is* Aang.' And Kiawentiio as Katara, and so on for our 'core four,' as we like to call them.

"They just nailed it. We didn't know if we were just extremely lucky, or this talent pool was much deeper than we thought was out there. Also, because the project was conducted in such top secrecy, none of the actors who auditioned knew they were auditioning for Aang and Katara and Sokka, or that this was for *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, so they couldn't rely on trying to play to those characters."

NEW ORDER

One key concern for those who love the animated series is just how much the live action show will stray from the established mythology and major story points. Kim confirms that from the beginning DiMartino and Konietzko were never advocates of being "note perfect" with this translation of the story. "There's various reasons why you not only couldn't do that, but you wouldn't want to," he explains. "The first season was very much 'adventure of the week' episodes, and that's not suitable for a serialised drama for streaming services. Even so, we all →


You'd be hard-pushed to miss Aang in a crowd.

Elizabeth Yu plays the nasty Azula.

Ian Ousley as 15-year-old Sokka.

Losf's Daniel Dae Kim as Ozai.

Kiawentiio as waterbender Katara.

Dallas Liu as Prince/Fire Lord Zuko.

knew that there were things we wanted to change, but not just for the sake of change. There had to be a reason for the change.

"There was never any talk of making, say, Katara any edgier or modern," Kim says. "But there was a lot of discussion as how to dimensionalise her character more. She's a character that, obviously, is very important to a lot of people, and in the original was terrific. Over the course of three seasons, she grew even more.

"But in the first season, there was a lot of room to grow her character for our purposes, as well. So that's something we would discuss. It was more about, 'What do we change to make it fit into the format we need narratively? What are the things that we liked and actually want to expand upon?'"

That includes some additions from DiMartino and Konietzko's expanded universe of storytelling, including the *Avatar: The Last Airbender* comic books and novelisations. "We took elements from those sources and wove them into our story," Kim confirms. "It's one of the advantages of playing in this universe as it's continued to grow and expand."

The last big hurdle when it came to the feasibility of this live action adaptation was cleared thanks to the advancement of visual effects since Shyamalan's film was made. Because if you can't credibly make audiences believe that bending elements looks real, or that a creature like sky bison Appa is alive and breathing, then why bother?

"There's no question that what we can do now with visual effects was a factor in deciding to go forward with this project," Kim confirms. "One of the first things we did, even before anything got going in production, was a bending test. We wanted to see what the bending was going to look like. When I saw it, I said, 'Yeah, we can tell the story.' We've gotten to the point where this is believable and effective, and has an impact when you see it. One of the important things is that we needed to appeal to viewers who weren't the diehard fans. If you don't know the world, you really *need* to be sold and pulled into it, so that requires the best possible look. So that was one of the things that convinced me we could pull this off."

Two of Kim's collaborators on that front are director/executive producer Jabbar Raisani and SFX supervisor Marion Spates. The two have collaborated together on other VFX-heavy Netflix series like *Lost In Space* and *Stranger Things*, and are spearheading the look and integration of the CG elements.

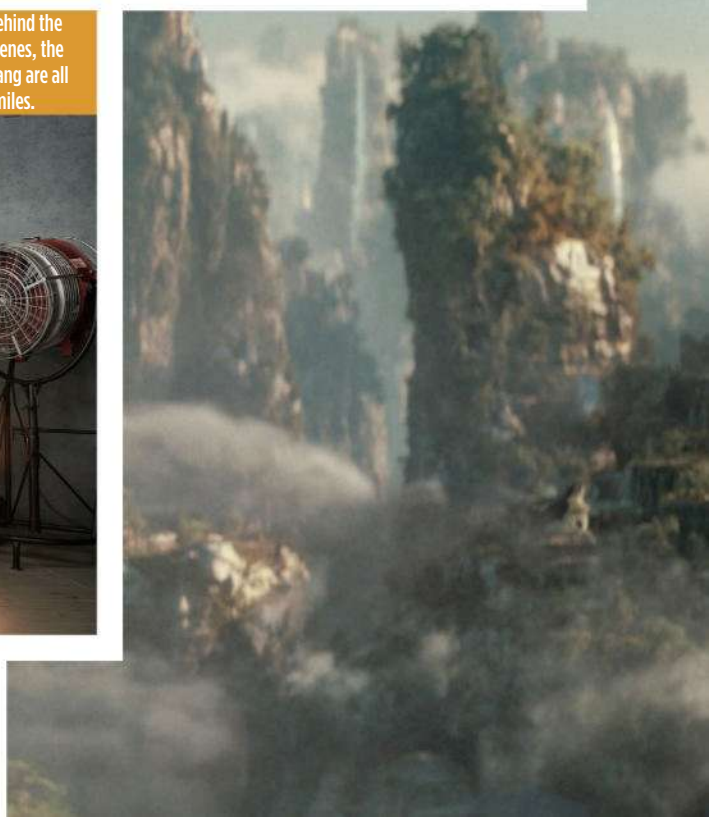
"I've worked on a lot of hard shows, but I would say this has to be the hardest because of the scope of it," Spates explains. "With all the different creatures and the bending, it's all over the top, to be honest with you."

> **"Since we had the advantage of knowing a lot of things that are ahead, we play to that"**

"I think another part is that people want to like it [the new version], but they're scared to like it," Raisani continues, assessing the fandom. "There's a lot more pressure, because they're like, 'Please, *please* don't mess it up!' So we always start with the animated series, constantly going back. In fact, when you look at the first version of our edits, for every shot, we can find something in the animated series. That's what we sent to our vendors – sharing the live action footage with the animated reference that we said you should be going back to *every* step of the way."

The balancing act required to ultimately please the *Avatar: The Last Airbender* faithful is

Behind the scenes, the gang are all smiles.



Casey Camp-Horinek as Gran Gran.

one that Kim acknowledges has been stress-inducing but also creatively fulfilling. He says that through dissecting the first season of the animated show, they came to see themes that emerged among some of the stories, and how some of them matched up really well.

"You can take a look at two completely different episodes, say the episode with [Freedom Fighters leader] Jet and say an episode with the Northern Air Temple, and you find that they're both about characters who have been driven to extremes by a century of war. Once you start to see those, then you start to see this is how we can tell the story going forward."

As a fan, he admits there's been a lot of joy in bringing to life story milestones like how Aang got out of the iceberg, or the introduction of the Southern Air Temple. They've also made an effort to seed in surprises for even the most devoted original series stans.

"The original series never shows the Fire Nation attacking the Southern Air Temple, and that's something we do see in our version," Kim teases. "Since we had the advantage of knowing a lot of things that are ahead, we play to that. It's not a secret that Azula is not in season one of the original series. But we know how big a character Azula becomes in the series, so we had the benefit of hindsight in fleshing out her character and being able to tell a story with her in it in season one."

Kim says he's at peace knowing this version of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* may not please every existing fan, but that they aimed to bring to life everything that makes the mythology and characters so indelible.

"It was a little bit of unravelling the narrative threads of the original, and then weaving them back together again into what I like to call a remix," he summarises. "Hopefully, it'll feel true to the spirit of the original, in a slightly new context."

Avatar: The Last Airbender is on Netflix from 22 February.

Aang, Sokka and Katara head off for the big shop.

CREATURE FEATURES

APPA

In this series, Appa, Aang's beloved flying fuzzball of a friend, is a marvel of CG hair and soulful eyes. Executive producer Jabbar Raisani and VFX supervisor Marion Spates tell *SFX* they knew they had to land this critter or they'd be toast.

Jabbar Raisani: Ultimately, we're starting with the animated series in trying to find this cross section of, what does Appa feel like? If you really study a lot of the [animated] images, Appa is drawn differently in different frames across the series, so you can't take one 3D model and have it represent Appa from every angle that's been represented in the show. Thus, you're trying to get the feeling, and that's the most important thing.

For better or worse, that's a lot of technical exploration. Finding reference was our start. What does Appa feel like in the series? We did facial stuff and full body stuff. Then we tried to get into the technical execution of, what does it actually mean to create something like this? Because you have to create every tooth, the tongue, and the relationship of those various things. It has a real difference in the emotion and how the performance is conveyed. We really went into every single part of Appa and tried to find real-world reference, to bring Appa to life in a way that felt like the animated series but fitted into the live action world.

Marion Spates: We studied real-life animals. Most importantly, we wanted to pay homage to the anime. We studied how he flew in the anime. But then we cherry-picked creatures that could mimic what we're looking for. Because of his weight, we went to a manatee for the tail – and even for his little leg swims, because of how the manatees swim. As far as the look of his mouth and teeth, we looked at cows. We looked at the length of the tongues of cows. We looked at the Scottish cow with the long hair. And bison are a big inspiration. There's a lot of little nuances of different animals in him to help create such a large creature.

MOMO

Another entirely CG character that becomes part of Aang's pack is Momo, the flying lemur. An ally who provides a lot of comic relief, the character needed to be convincing and have a large personality in a compact body.

Jabbar Raisani: Momo is more heightened and stylised. We could only lean so much into the cartoon, and we had to pick up the rest in reality. We went back to the animated series asking, why is Momo cute, and why do we identify Momo as Momo? It was through a lot of analysis of real animals, and continuing to go back to the animated series for feeling, that we were able to find our version of Momo.

SFX JOINS THE COVEN ON SET FOR NEW SUPERNATURAL DRAMA DOMINO DAY

WORDS: **EMILY MURRAY**

Witch,

Please

Siena Kelly giving it her witchy all as Domino.

A RARE SUNNY DAY IN Manchester, and *SFX* is on set for new BBC YA drama *Domino Day*. Even the cast admit they're surprised by the weather, revealing that they've never seen anything quite like Manchester rain before. Welcome to the north, ladies and gentlemen. Not that they see much of the light anyway, as *Domino Day* is a celebration of creatures of the night: witches.

The six-part series follows a powerful young witch named Domino (Siena Kelly) as she's haunted by an increasing need to feed off the energy of others, using dating apps to track down targets. In doing so, Domino is endangering the magical realm, threatening to reveal to mankind that witches live among them. A coven is therefore following her every move, trying to learn exactly who and what Domino is... something that she's also trying to discover herself.

RULE-BREAKER

Dark, sexy and smart, *Domino Day* follows in the footsteps of other British supernatural shows such as *Being Human*, another BBC Three production. For creator Lauren Sequeira though, onboard as writer and producer, the inspiration for her show was distinctly more American. In fact, *Domino Day* is her answer to something she perceives to be lacking in UK genre TV, she tells *SFX*.

"I've always loved supernatural shows – *The Vampire Diaries*, *True Blood*, etc – but we don't really do that genre over here, not a lot anyway. So with the BBC getting behind this, saying 'Let's do witches', that's cool."

It's been a long development process, with the idea for *Domino Day* bubbling away in Sequeira's mind since 2018. As *SFX* stands on set with her, the writer confesses that it feels "pretty special, yet surreal" to finally be shooting her series. Today the team are filming at Domino's flat, a ramshackle room with a mattress lying on the floor, tucked away down an alley in the bohemian part of the city, the Northern Quarter.

Once home to superheroes, with the graffiti "Captain America was here" serving as a reminder that Marvel's *Captain America: The First Avenger* was shot on these streets, the city is now overrun by witches. Manchester wasn't originally the location of choice for *Domino Day*; Sequeira reveals that initially it was set in London, with the BBC requesting the move to "represent all regions".

However, now the team can't picture the show taking place anywhere else. Actor Poppy Lee Friar, who plays coven member Geri, explains why Manchester provides the perfect backdrop: "It has the exact fire needed for this show and a very grungy, New York vibe, which suits the aesthetic. That, juxtaposed against this sexy, neon styling, it's a character itself. There's an aged, decaying beauty here which reflects the dying-out of an establishment in our magical realm, something which is continually being challenged. So there's that artistic relationship."

That "establishment" is a governing body of witches known as Elders, who have laid out numerous laws for magical beings to follow to ensure that there is order in the world. Without knowing it, Domino has been breaking several of these rules, which has drawn her to the attention of the local Manchester coven.

Led by Alisha Bailey's witch Kat, the coven decide that they should find out more about Domino before reporting her to the Elders. In doing so they also unwittingly reveal more about themselves, which, as Bailey tells *SFX*, is a source of conflict within the group. "Kat takes the role of leading the coven quite seriously, which is reflected in the way that she presents herself. She believes that she knows what is best for the group, even though her actions at times are questionable – she believes what she is doing is right for everybody involved.

"It's a role that comes with a lot of responsibility which she doesn't take lightly, especially because I don't think naturally, in her fabric, she is a leader. The rediscovery she has with her heritage and background doesn't align with what it means to be a coven leader on the surface in this world, which causes so much division within herself and the group."

The four women of the coven couldn't be more different, so when trouble lands on their doorstep, the fractures start to deepen. However, as Lee Friar adds, despite their divisions and differences there's a tight bond between them that can never be completely broken apart.

"They are all unique but are collectively bound by this magic and this idea of a coven, which essentially is a group of people looking out for each other, celebrating each other's differences, and moving through the world having each other's backs.

"You can be a strong individual but it's great to also have this community, this group of friends – which is something that I feel has got a little lost in our society. It's beneficial to have somewhere where you can be yourself, a positive place,

Percelle Ascott as Leon, definitely not flirting.

Alisha Bailey is Kat, the leader of the local coven.

> **They are all unique but are collectively bound by this magic and this idea of a coven**

that gives you energy. For me, that's the subtext underneath all the fun magic stuff."

Recognising the importance of this, the coven reach out to Domino instead of handing her straight over to the Elders, realising that the lone witch probably just needs some kind of support network. Babirye Bukilwa's Sammie leads the charge here as the empath of the group, using her aura magic (which gives her the power to see auras) to sense that Domino is powerful, but not totally dangerous.

Each member of the coven has their own strength: leader Kat can turn invisible, Geri has telekinetic abilities, while the youngest of the group, Jules (played by Molly Harris), is skilled in potion-making.

One of the many questions the coven are asking about Domino, then, is "What is her special power?", as Bukilwa explains. "In every town there is a coven. All witches should know each other, and to be a witch you have to be part of a community. So when Domino arrives in Manchester it's very much a case of asking 'Who are you, what's your power, where are you from?'

"Using all of our different specialisms, we are trying to figure out who she is, but there's a resistance there which just complicates things further."

The word "resistance" may be underselling Domino's reaction to the coven sticking their nose in her business, as she fiercely pushes back against them. For actor Siena Kelly, who portrays the lead witch, Domino's reaction to the coven is only natural given that she really doesn't know what's going on – her hostility is fuelled by fear.

"Domino is very guarded, as she wasn't raised around witches," Kelly explains. "She doesn't have a community or her own coven, she has no idea really. She suspects that what she is doing, feeding off the energy of these men, isn't good, but she's also so protective, she doesn't welcome the coven with open arms.

"She has all of these secrets, things that she has done, so it takes a lot for her to feel safe enough to open up, and really she only does that when she feels caught out with no choice but to share," Kelly continues. "Her building a relationship with the coven, then, is a very slow process. She can't really reveal everything and they are understandably suspicious and worried about her, and what she is capable of."

Geri (Poppy Lee Friar). Her power: er... hydration?

Further complicating things is Sam Howard-Sneyd's witch Silas, who the actor describes as "the villain of the piece" – a mysterious figure from Domino's past who re-emerges to cause further chaos.

Understandably, Sneyd doesn't want to reveal too much about his scoundrel, but he does think it's a fun challenge to play the baddie. "I wanted to portray him because he's not a nice guy. He does terrible things and makes decisions that aren't in the best interests of others, being much more for himself.

"I think if people can detach themselves from their own ways of working, and see someone else's perspective, they may realise that actually they have some of these tendencies themselves, which allows them to effect change in the way that they act. It allows them to re-evaluate themselves."

Silas is a selfish figure, and while Sneyd is unwilling to give away too many clues as to what exactly his villain wants from Domino, he does say that it is all about "power" – oh, and also that he teams up with his mum on this bitter quest.

"We become this very dynamic, toxic duo. We didn't have a good relationship before we teamed up and when we do, well, it's still not good, but we are driven by necessity, going after our own power.

"Silas is a person that when something happens, he spirals further down into his ego, which is a protection mechanism. If you insult him, three years later he might orchestrate that you lose your job because of it. It's not healthy!"

TRIGGER WARNING

A vengeful duo on a quest for power, a coven of chaos, and a witch who uses dating apps to find her prey... *Domino Day* has all the ingredients needed to become our next YA fixation.

For the cast, they just hope that the show resonates with its audience, and in Bukilwa's words, pisses all the right people off: "I think some men, misogynists, are going to be really triggered and offended, but good! That element of the show, the dating scene, will open up conversations which I think are necessary. It may be difficult, but it's important."

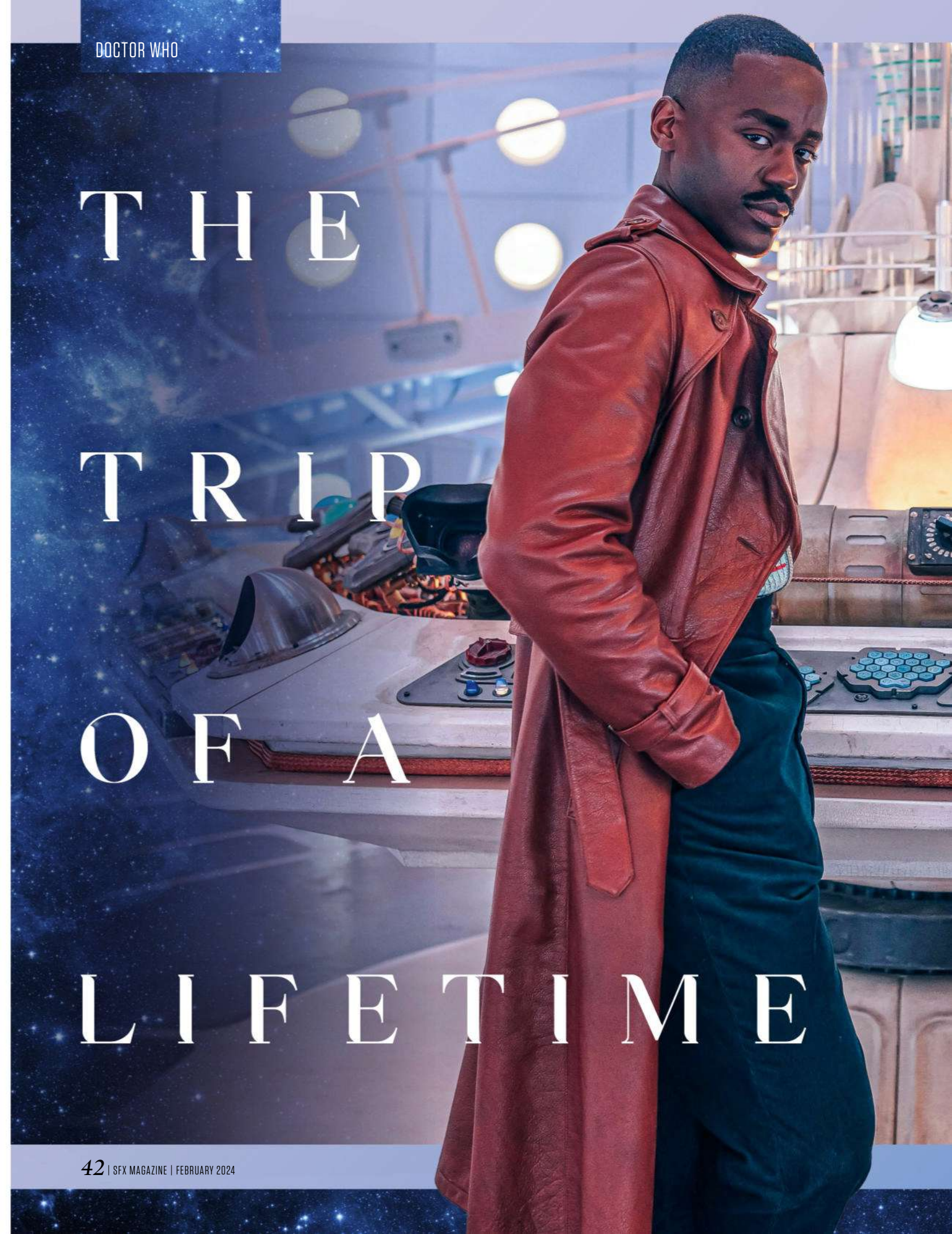
Meanwhile for Harris, who plays Jules, it's about time that a female-led show reclaimed witchcraft: "The idea of witches is very tied to women and has had negative connotations historically.

"We are saying 'Fuck that' – this is actually what it is and it can be whatever we want it to be. There's a need for female-led shows right now, especially ones that debunk allegories like this."

Domino Day is on BBC Three and BBC iPlayer from 31 January.

STOCK ELEMENTS: ISTOCK/GETTY

THE TRIP OF A LIFETIME



JOEL COLLINS TRADES TACKLING DAEMONS TO TRAVELLING THE TIME VORTEX IN DOCTOR WHO

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

As executive producer on *His Dark Materials*, Joel Collins helped steer one of the most ambitious fantasy series ever created for the BBC to worldwide acclaim. As the EP on *Doctor Who*, he's part of the team taking the beloved sci-fi juggernaut to new global heights.

He's had multiple award nominations and has BAFTA-wins under his belt but his cool credits go further still, encompassing work on *Black Mirror*, *The Day Of The Triffids*, the 2005 film of *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy* and even *Muppet Treasure Island*. Oh, and just some music videos with the likes of Madonna and Pet Shop Boys.

Now he's dealing with the likes of Janis Goblin and a whole new series of adventures that he promises will blow viewers away – that is, if he can remember which corner of the Whoniverse he's working in at any given moment...

Ncuti Gatwa giving it all Christmas for the special.

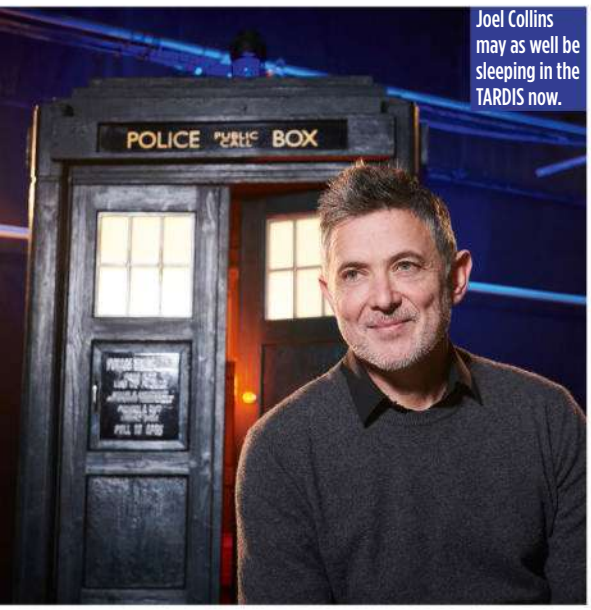
Millie Gibson has some aerial adventures.

But there's still time for some stylish chilling.

How is life in the world of *Doctor Who* for you?

◆ Making this many episodes concurrently is extraordinarily complicated. Because from our perspective, Phil [Collinson, executive producer], myself, Jane [Tranter] and Julie [Gardner, producers] and Russell, we obviously are in there from the early days of its development with Russell's scripts, which are always amazing and so fluid. I kind of see them like bouncy balls, you're watching a ball bounce because they never falter. You just see it go from beginning to end and it's just impressive. But we obviously have to then work out, "How do we make it?" and all that stuff. Then we find the crew and the director and the designer – we've got Phil [Sims], who's amazing. So with all of this stuff, it takes its time. Then obviously we're there, putting it together in post. At the moment we're deep in the middle of delivering the episodes for season one while shooting, prepping and Russell writing the episodes for season two.

A lot of people that make a show, they just make a show, you know? This is a show that *keeps* on being made, if that makes sense. When you have one moment – you've delivered that – there's 1,000 things next to deliver. So it's quite intense, but it's fun.



Joel Collins may as well be sleeping in the TARDIS now.

It's a wonderful position to be in. It's brilliant that we're getting all of this stuff.

◆ Russell, as you know, he's just a huge *Doctor Who* fan. We've all grown up with it as kids – it affected Russell in a way that made him be who he is and where he is now. He really understands *Doctor Who*, he really understands canon, he is the creator, it's amazing and impressive working with him. I mean, it's unlike anything else. I think what he really wanted was to make sure that the fans have what he wanted, which was this consistent layer of shows that could come in different guises and ways at different times of the year and year in year out, and to try and look at how we deliver that.

Also, you released four incredible specials in 2023, so you've already set your own bar quite high.

◆ I think that the interesting thing with making a show that raises up a level, and then making it to a pattern that's more than the previous pattern, is you're obviously stepping over much bigger hurdles, and you can't go any faster. If that makes sense? You just can't. VFX can't be delivered any faster, and often is slower than we'd like, because it's just very, very complicated. VFX itself is one of those things

Jonathan Groff joins the cast in a... Regency episode?

> **“At the moment we’re deep in the middle of delivering the episodes for season one”**

that 95% of it, maybe even more, maybe 97% of it, can happen at a certain type of pace. But the hardest part of VFX is that final three to 5%, that final thing that’s just the bit of the final tightening, like an edit of magic, and all of that just takes time. So when you’re increasing the scale you are obviously just increasing complexity and the chance of it taking longer. Or you decrease the quality, and I don’t think any of us will ever want to do that. I think the opportunity to give Russell’s writing the kind of quality it deserves has been the most exhilarating challenge. I mean, he’s a *genius* writer, and you just want to make sure that it just gets the best handling. We put ourselves under enormous pressure to deliver that.

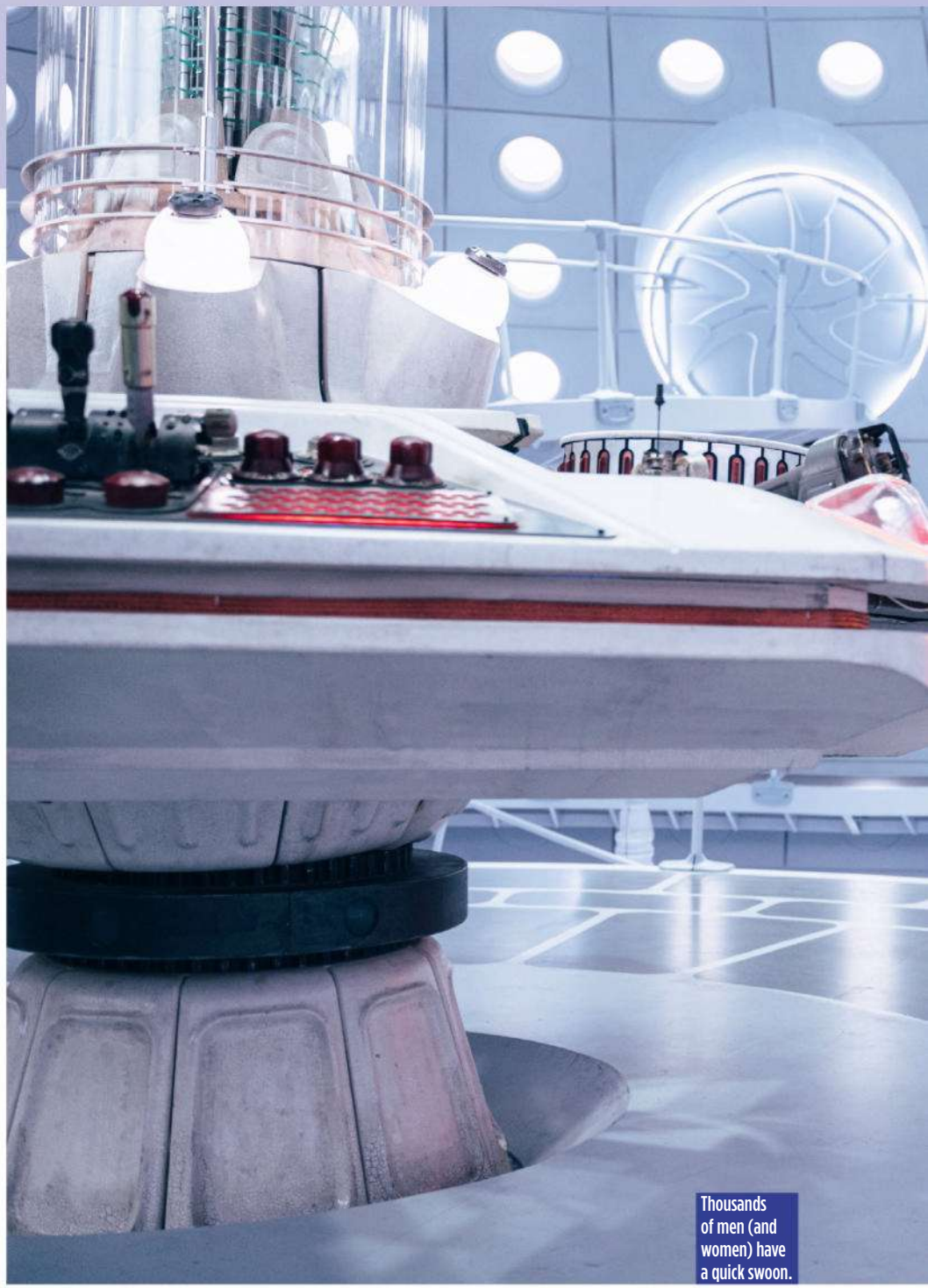
Do you think the Christmas special was a perfect jumping-on point for the new era?

◆ I think everyone seems to ask that question about Disney. And obviously, that’s an easy one to answer in my book. But, I think the new era of *Doctor Who*, ignoring who’s making it, needs no barrier to entry. Russell wanted to bring fun to it, he just wanted to bring joy into the show and challenge people in all the right ways that Russell does. But also make it fun at the right points, make it really fun, take you on a ride. So I think that’s where the barrier to entry is removed, because adults and children alike enjoy that.

And it’s not like, “Oh, it’s just for kids”, or “It’s just for adults” or any of this stuff. Actually he always looked at Pixar films, in the way he wanted this to be. If you look at that Christmas Special, he wanted it to have the fun of a Pixar film, and the complex levels of a Pixar film. No matter how well they’re animated, they’re all in the writing. They just are. They do workshops over the jokes and the humour and the nuance.

They work with every bit of that writing in Pixar, to make sure that when they get to the animation it reaches every beat, and Russell just has that innately. But from the Disney perspective, it’s just a bigger audience. So the show is the show that is bigger. But it’s the same? It’s hard to explain, →

It's Janis Goblin! Kids, ask your dad to explain.



Thousands of men (and women) have a quick swoon.

isn't it? You're a *Doctor Who* fan: it's still *Doctor Who*, isn't it?

Yes, 100%.

◆ Yeah. So all of the fear that everyone had, the "Disneyisation" or whatever you call it, that would only happen if it wasn't being made by Russell. Or by somebody who wasn't as big a fan as Russell.

It's funny that crossed anyone's mind, seeing the creative team.

◆ But *you* know who the team was; people don't. They're just looking at it from an outside perspective or looking at the news thinking, "Is this a British institution that's gonna change?" And no. Russell was clear two years ago. I said, "What's new? Is it more mature? Is it darker? What's going to happen? What are you going to do?" He looked at me like I was mad. He said, "What are you talking about?" And I said, "Well, what was new?" and he went, "Nothing, it's going to be *Doctor Who*. And you're gonna make it amazing. And I'm going to bring joy to it." He didn't say he was gonna make it amazing. I think that's why I was there... But basically, that's the point, he was just like, you guys [Bad Wolf] are coming in with me to work with all of us. It's a big family. There's a huge amount of people from the BBC. There's people from BBC studios involved. There's a huge amount of people who have worked on it from the studio's perspective. There's a huge amount of people from Bad Wolf. We've worked on *Dark Materials* and other Bad Wolf shows. It's a real coming together of skill, passion, technical know-how, and that's what makes it exciting. It's not a new team, like you've seen. And it's not an old team. It's a real mix of passionate people.

> **"Someone did say, 'That robot looks a little bit like Marvin from Hitchhiker's Guide'"**

You've worked with the Muppets and Madonna. How does the Meep compare?

◆ Well, I suppose you put them both together...! Basically I've worked a lot with characters. I did this thing as a bit of a joke with a friend, we did it for fun, a meerkat that was selling insurance. And obviously that took

off... I've worked on various things like the original PG Tips monkey when it was with ITV Digital before they went down. So I'm not new to characters, of all sorts – like you say, from working with Henson's Muppets 32 years ago through to... no one's really connected Marvin. Obviously, I did *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*. And if you look at special two you might think... [Laughs] Someone did say, "That robot looks a little bit like Marvin."

I mean, it's not uber-deliberate. But actually everyone brings a certain level of their style or their kind of creative. And some of the team, like Phil Sims, worked with me on *Hitchhiker's*. No one's gone online and looked on IMDb and gone, "Hang on. That's the guy that designed Marvin." But basically Garth Jennings is the director, he's the creative behind a huge amount of *Hitchhiker's*, so I can't take all the credit. He and I put that together, but he's kind of an insane creative like Russell is. There's very few of them you meet that you just want to follow because they're so amazing.

But what's interesting is this team is quite varied. They come from movies, they come from *Doctor Who*, they come from *His Dark Materials*, who were challenged to deliver a kind of level of British product in television drama that could not stumble creatively. We just couldn't, we couldn't wrongfoot those three seasons of a show, because they'd been wrongfooted before in film.

It wasn't a failure, but it wasn't a success that went to the second and third film. And we couldn't make a mistake with that season. It was, I think, at the time, the biggest for the BBC. And it feels like this is the next biggest for the BBC. So it's quite exciting doing all that.

That creature element must have been useful for the goblins...

◆ Almost all the goblins' faces, ears, and eyes are CG. Then most of the wide shots are entirely CG, all the flying and crowds are entirely CG. The Goblin King is actually 50% a CG replacement. We ended up wanting more expression in the Goblin King's face.

Seb Barker from Automatik, who was working with us very closely – he did the VFX on special three, did the UNIT tower and the helicopters and all kinds of things. He was passionate. By this point he was just so →

Who/Traitors spin-off CONFIRMED. (Not really.)

Director Mark Tonderai with Anita "Mrs Flood" Dobson.

Yes, it's a real jukebox, with real songs on it.

invested and we've gone on some journeys with him I probably can't talk about yet, but I'd love you to see in the season... We have different vendors [freelance effects companies] for different episodes, but he's the one who's kind of really got it when it comes to creatures. Because you never have enough money, so everyone always says no, and that's why you do most of it in camera.

But he was like, if they don't blink and they don't move and they wobble or whatever, we just couldn't do it. So we wanted a certain amount of performance. Obviously they're adults shrunk down and then we also wanted quite a lot of expression. So as soon as the expression failed, which was the majority of the face – the eyes were static, the ears wobbled – we ended up having to track. So if you look at Janis Goblin singing, if you stop and you watch those shots, that's a CG face singing. Sometimes the lower jaw is the only thing left of the goblin.

Then suddenly, we were like, "Well, let's do more. And then let's fly them around." If you really look at the ship in the sky, you can see little CG goblins on the wide shots. Once we had them, we were like, let's use them.

But the most interesting thing, and this goes back to the Meep and to Russell, is Russell loves that *Doctor Who* tone of textual reality. He doesn't want to go CG and have it look CG. Because he feels the audience won't love it as much as you will if you see and you feel this thing. If there's no uncanny valley hitting you, and you sense it for real, you're enjoying it for real – and you can see that effect so far across these episodes.

We've hit a lot of hurdles in VFX. You just look at all the different bridges we've had to cross, and how some of them are just insane things to cross. I mean, special two! But basically the goblins, like the Meep, were a very similar approach. The Meep's face was almost entirely replaced. Then if you look at the Meep walking, that's a CG Meep.

> **"What an ending. What can I say? It's an amazing ending"**

Most of the Meep when he goes angry is all full CG, almost none of it is in camera. Because it's doing certain things and saying certain things that the puppet couldn't do. I think you can always look innocent as a puppet, so we got away with a few shots. But we did change the eyes and blinks and things like that and then we augmented with a CG mouth.

But when it came to the progression of that character through special one – I mean, we knew before we even shot it. We knew before we even made a puppet. I explained through my experiences as a creature designer all those years ago that you can look really innocent as a puppet, like a glove puppet can look innocent. But when you get angry, you are a very complicated character. Nuanced. Anger is complicated!

What was the most challenging or demanding element of the four specials?

◆ I think delivering an episode that was so VFX on special two was the singlemost challenging thing we've done, because it took over a year of VFX reviews to consistently and constantly look at maybe what is the same thing slowly changing over a year – if that makes sense. Every week or every couple of

IMAGES: © BBC STUDIOS/BAD WOLF/RAY BURMISTON/JAMES PARDON/MAXINE HOWELL/ALISTAIR HEAP

Who/Avengers spin-off CONFIRMED. (Not really.)

Place your bets on who Mrs Flood really is...

days, another little change so you're almost going a bit like "Waaaah!". I mean, it's not a negative, it's more just how hard it was. For us to really keep focused with all the noise around us, and we're making all the other shows, keep a real laser focus on the individual challenges of an episode with so much complexity.

We had a very funny thing, we finally thought we'd got there with the corridor and we were very excited and we were like, "This is it, the corridor looks done. This is good." Then suddenly when we were watching the walk, every piston changed colour, and we realised that someone had not quite figured out the continuity. Because we'd done shot by shot by shot, and when you put them all together, you realise that the piston went from pink to yellow to green to blue. Like, oh my god. So there's the level of complexity to do everything from kind of a still frame through to a small sequence through to a small, what we call mini-cut. Where it's a series of shots, just making up a slightly bigger series of sequences, then a bigger sequence.

The problem is, when you finally see the big one, you then see loads of holes. But you're 10 months down. So we got there. But that was a very big challenge for us, in the sense of probably a more complicated type of thing to try and achieve. I can talk to you about another challenge, but I'd have to gouge your eyes, and my ears, and your ears, and everything out. So I can't.

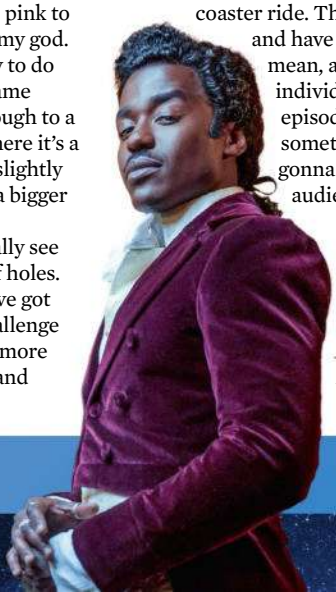
Is there anything you *can* tease about the upcoming season?

Well, we obviously get to go to Abbey Road – Russell's already given that one away – to see the Beatles. I really want to tell you everything. What can I tell you without spoilering stuff?

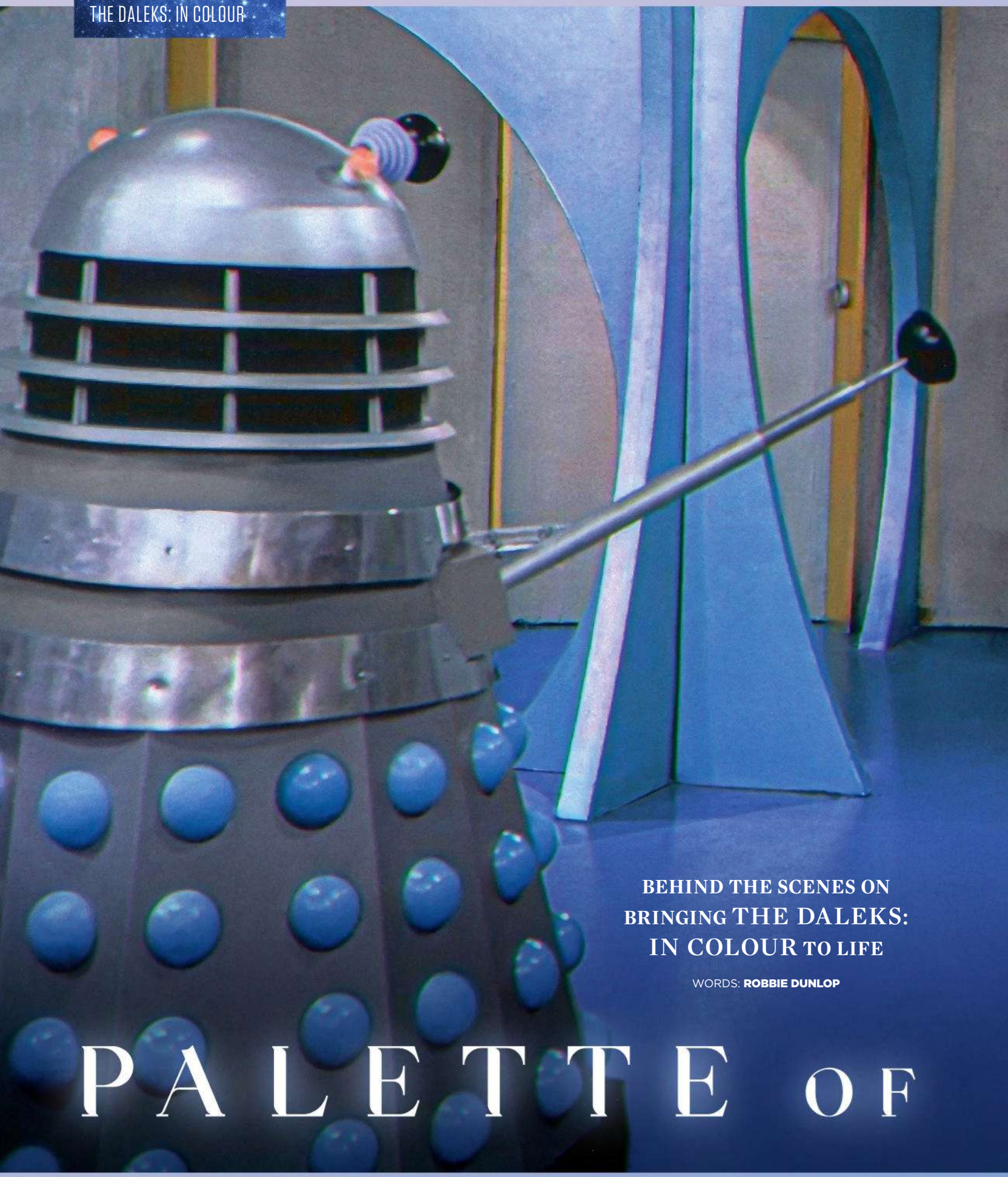
I think that I would say that the audience needs to keep a keen eye out for amazing fun Easter eggs and things that are going to layer through the season. And what an ending. What can I say? It's an amazing ending.

Every episode of season one is like a roller coaster ride. They are individually brilliant and have been amazing to make. I mean, amazing for us all to go on individual journeys through the episodes, and they culminate in something fantastic. And it's gonna be really fun for the audience.

We're already in the VFX reviews. We've started the VFX reviews for the finale. And it's just bloody exciting!



Doctor Who is on BBC One in May, iPlayer and Disney+.



PALETTE OF

BEHIND THE SCENES ON BRINGING THE DALEKS: IN COLOUR TO LIFE

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

THE DALEKS

TO CELEBRATE 60 YEARS OF *Doctor Who*, the BBC not only gifted fans a brand-new Doctor in Ncuti Gatwa, but a brand-new way to experience the original: William Hartnell. *The Daleks: In Colour*, broadcast on BBC Four in November, marked the series' very first official colourisation. The 1963 story has special significance, being the one that introduced the Doctor's most notorious enemies, and this month it's released on disc.

According to lead colourisation artist Rich Tipple, the idea came from Russell T Davies, whose plan upon returning to the show was to "put the entire back catalogue on iPlayer and begin to colourise the archive". *Who* executive producers Joel Collins and Phil Collinson sounded out Tipple in early 2022 after they saw some of his unofficial work on YouTube. He had the experience and the contacts to make a full-scale production happen.

The important first step was to assemble a team. Tipple approached Scott Burditt and Kieran Highman – his collaborators on an unreleased colourisation of an episode of 1965 story "The Daleks' Master Plan" – and Timothy K Brown. Work began on the project in November 2022.

Characters each had a specific colour palette.

THE ORDEAL

So, just how did the four colourists set about regenerating, so to speak, 75 minutes of black and white telly? According to Highman it begins by breaking down each scene into its constituent frames (there are 24 frames in a second), with every fifth or so individually coloured "as if doing a painting on a computer".

"And then," Tipple picks up, "you tell some motion interpolation software, 'This is frame one, this is frame five; crossfade between the two. This is frame five and frame 10; crossfade between the two.' However, if the camera's moving in or out, or there's high motion, it's going to fall flat on its face. You have to go in and fix it. It's time-consuming."

Highman stresses that none of the colour is automatically generated, being "painted into the key frames by the artist." Early on in the process, Tipple allocated each team member a different location in the story which would be their responsibility to colourise. "That gave us consistency in those frames," he explains.

Consequently, Brown oversaw the TARDIS control room scenes, Burditt the caves, Highman the jungle, and Tipple the Dalek city. "There's a really lovely moment where Susan is in the TARDIS and when the doors open you see the jungle outside," Tipple says. "Kieran did the jungle elements inside Tim's set. Consistency, consistency, consistency was basically what we were looking for."

The team referred to colour photos taken during filming to ensure a degree of continuity between the colours of original costumes and props. However, creative licence was strongly encouraged by the producers. "It was hammered into us very early on that we were not making a documentary of exactly what it looked like," Tipple says. "This is, 'What if *Doctor Who* had original *Star Trek* money to produce something in colour, on colour cameras? Obviously, they would have painted the sets differently, so how would they have looked?'

"But of course, you're working with something that a lot of people care about and is television heritage. We were never going to change the colour of the balls on the Dalek skirt or make the TARDIS red."

The TARDIS console threw up a problem all in itself. "Some people really passionately believe it should be green, and an equal number of people really passionately believe it should be white," Tipple explains.

"Both of them have completely valid arguments," he continues. "It just comes down to well, yeah, it was actually green" – that's the colour it was painted to avoid causing flare on the cameras – "but it was intended to look white, so both opinions are valid."

On that note, we have to talk about other debates. Had the team been prepared for the rowdy online discussion surrounding Barbara's bright pink shirt? "It was totally inevitable," Tipple laughs. "We knew Barbara had a pale blue top, but we also knew that Susan had a pale blue top. A lot of the city walls were pale blue, and the floor was blue."

Rich Tipple works on his team's labour of love.

"And Ian had a blue shirt," adds Highman. "The Doctor had a blue tie, the TARDIS is blue, and all the Thals were in blue."

"We did six different versions of Barbara's shirt," says Tipple. "We looked at it in yellow and green; almost every colour that you can imagine. If people think we plucked pink out of the air, believe it or not, no, we put a huge amount of thought into it.

"The one that really spun it for us was when she's up against the silver door being menaced by the plunger [at the end of episode one], you could have a more sympathetic colour against the silver than pink.

"However, when you're in the cave and it's incredibly dark, and you can almost see nothing with really harsh spotlight lighting, it's so important that she's wearing a bright colour. If she had been wearing pale blue, the scenes would have looked really drab and we wouldn't have got the look that we wanted."

Highman observes that the shade is reminiscent of Barbara's trousers in the 1965 film *Dr Who And The Daleks*: "That was one clue that it was a colour she'd wear."

The producers made the final call. Tipple says they "100% made the right decision.

Trying out various colours for Barbara's top.

Susan (Carole Ann Ford) and Alydon (John Lee).

CHALLENGE ANTODUS

Which sequences were the trickiest to colourise?

For Highman it was the jungle scenes, "just because of the amount of detail in the set already. You also have 10 Thal characters over-crossing. The more moving colour elements you have, the more difficult it is. Things like that you can't take a lot of shortcuts with."

Tipple nominates a scene in the Dalek city's radiation room. "You can't cut it because it's essential to the plot. Scott Burditt had his work cut out because it's really dark with really bright spots of colour and you've got characters moving in and out of colour – moving in and out of the light. So that was a really, really difficult one to do."

© BBC

Talking as someone who's seen the shirt in every colour on every set, I thought it looked best in pink. Honestly, it looks fabulous!"

"We got to add so many fun things," Tipple says of the team's many other visual flourishes, such as the reddish tint to Skaro's sky. "We showed that to Phil [Collinson], who just loved it. Then we said, 'When it's the evening, we want the sky to glow green like it's toxic.'

"The reason we did that was because when we're in the jungle scenes that are set in the evening, you can put in this really beautiful teal light that spreads across the flowers, making it so much creepier in a way that it just wouldn't have otherwise worked. We thought, well, it's a different time of day, what's not to say the red sun doesn't move away and you've got the green toxic atmosphere there?"

"This is something that Russell was very happy with," says Highman. "That we were not looking out with one mindset, just doing the work; we were thinking about the story elements, using colour –"

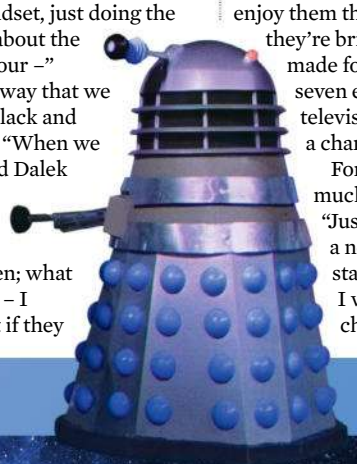
"– to tell the story in a way that we couldn't when it was in black and white," Tipple interjects. "When we showed them the infected Dalek with its eye, which was Kieran's idea – and which I just thought was the best thing I'd ever seen; what an amazing use of colour – I remember thinking what if they didn't like it, what if they had an issue? So, I really, really sold it. They were like, 'Oh my god, this is brilliant.' I think 'marvellous' was in there somewhere."

One of the colourisation's key objectives was to act as a gateway to the earliest *Doctor Who* episodes for younger fans. "I think we sometimes look at these things almost like holy relics," Tipple says. "It's important that we appreciate how special they are and how much they mean to people but, actually, if we want to open these things up to a new audience, this is a brilliant way of doing it.

"My wife... never, ever, no way would she have sat through seven black and white episodes. But she watched *The Daleks: In Colour* and said, 'I really enjoyed that, I'd be up for watching another one.' My seven-year-old watched it agog; she absolutely loved it.

"We're not taking the originals away. If you enjoy them then that's fantastic. I do, too; they're brilliant. But our colourisations are made for the people who won't enjoy seven episodes of black and white television. It's our way of saying, 'Give it a chance.'"

For Highman, their efforts are as much of a treat for old-school fans, "Just to be able to see [the story] in a new way."Tipple concurs. "When I started colourising, it wasn't because I wanted to open the era up to children. It was because I've seen these episodes hundreds, maybe thousands of times and when you colourise it, it's sort of like watching something new. It feels totally different. That was one of the biggest kicks I got out of doing it."



THE SURVIVORS

It took the team over 10 months to colourise the 75-minute edit (down from six 25-minute episodes). "The hours were literally unimaginable," Tipple says. "It takes a tremendous amount of time because you want to do it to a certain standard. There's a preconception that it's all AI, that you can press 'Control-Alt-AI' and it all sort of happens. But it's not like that. It's an incredibly manual process. It's hard work!

"Colourisation is definitely Marmite, but to get a five-star review from *The Telegraph* and to know, from my point of view, that it's the best we could have done... well, we're really proud of it.

"On this scale and to this level, I don't think many things have been comparable to it, ever. I hope people realise this wasn't done by a colourisation studio, but by four fans who love this stuff and really cared about getting it right."

And with Russell T Davies teasing a follow-up, it seems the colourists' work is far from being all over... "It could be a bright future," Tipple laughs.

The Daleks: In Colour is released on Blu-ray and DVD on 12 February.

MOTHERING SUNDAY

AS CARLA SUNDAY, **MICHELLE GREENIDGE** JOINS THE PRESTIGIOUS LIST OF ICONIC *DOCTOR WHO* MUMS

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

Were you a *Doctor Who* fan?
I didn't watch many episodes when I was growing up and there's a good reason for that: they frightened the life out of me! I was a bit of a wuss. As I got older and less fearful, my interest grew. I'm a fan. I'd say everyone on the show is, really. It's an amazing production to work on. It's iconic.

You played Rosa in Russell T Davies's *It's A Sin*...
I was in awe of the young talent in the room when I had my first read-through – kudos to Andy Pryor, the casting director; he's a genius. It was there that I met Russell. It was a big deal – you're meeting one of the biggest men in television, the room is filled with lots of important people, and then there's me.

I was hugely nervous, but Russell put me at ease straight away. That's just the way he is – he's always very warm and welcoming. He wants you to be happy and comfortable and part of the family. If you're happy, you'll produce your best work.

Long may he continue running *Doctor Who* because his talent is off the scale. Aside from that, his enthusiasm and the love that he has is incredible. To be part of any project of his is a true blessing.

How did *Doctor Who* come your way?
I auditioned. It came out of the blue. I knew instantly that it was an exceptionally special opportunity and I really wanted to nail the job. I feel incredibly blessed to fulfil my childhood dream and to forge my career as an actor because I had a 20-year career working in local government – in the housing department! So to be part of *Doctor Who*, to be one of the lead characters, has just been awesome. I'm living the dream.

What was it like working with Ncuti Gatwa?
Ncuti was a real inspired choice; he's exceptional. He has huge charisma. He's utterly stylish and profound. That makes for the best of Doctors. I'm so happy to have worked with him at the start of his *Doctor Who* journey. We had a lovely time on set. We laughed, we joked, we messed about, we didn't take ourselves too seriously. We were all just comfortable in our skin.

And Millie Gibson?
To approach my role, it had to come from a place of real truth, and the definite help was that there was an instant bond between myself and Millie. My first day working with her was on location in Bristol and we just instantly connected. There was no acting involved; as people we gelled. She's beautiful inside and out, she's bold and courageous, and yet she's still so young and gentle.

You got to play two very different sides of Carla. What was that like?
When we see the different version of Carla, we're looking at her without the love and joy of Ruby in her life, drained of the fire and joy that her daughter brings. These were tough scenes as they are about loss, but in a very *Doctor Who* kind of way, a loss maybe more felt than realised. It was quite a challenge to perform.

Greenidge as Carla, with Millie Gibson (and baby).

But Ncuti was awesome, very supportive. We had the best time shooting it.

Tell us about working with director Mark Tonderai.
Mark was the first director that I've ever worked with who actually shoots as well. I was quite surprised by that. He'd direct, then he'd come into the room, get behind the camera and start recording. I was thinking, "Is he messing about with the camera? What's going on here?" But he's actually a DP [director of photography] as well. It was interesting to watch. A lovely guy. Very calm, cool.

It's been announced that Carla is returning in 2024...
That was a really welcome surprise. There are no guarantees – it's all down to the writer. Nothing is written in stone. Anything can change. And that's the beauty of the show. I'm blessed to be working with these incredible people. It's a real family. There's a lot of love in that room.

> **"I had a 20-year career working in local government – in the housing department"**

Tell us about your role as a mugging victim in *Venom 2*.
It was a night shoot, spent fighting with a stunt man in Elephant and Castle [in South London], believe it or not. The day after I was filming on *I May Destroy You* and I cannot tell you, everything hurt! I could hardly walk. I was so sore, but I had the best time working with Tom [Hardy] and [director] Andy Serkis.

Doctor Who aside, what does the future hold for you?
I have worked on *Kaos* for Netflix, written by Charlie Covell, and Candice Carty-Williams's brilliant *Queenie*. I had the best time working with both Candice and Charlie, they were so incredibly supportive. I think both shows are going to be epic.

I'm really excited about the future. I'd like to keep building on comedic roles and high drama, but I'm very blessed to be doing a range of things. Whatever happens, what's most important to me is that I enjoy myself and that I'm happy.

PORTRAIT BY DAVID REISS

A basic 3D render of the Frost Vark below.

FOR SEAN KONRAD, GODZILLA IS something large, green and *primal*. "I know that I saw *Godzilla* at an age when I didn't understand it all," he tells *SFX*, remembering his first brush with Toho's Tokyo-trampling kaiju superstar. "I think I saw the narrated American version on TV when I was seven or something. It was like, 'Whoa, that's scary!', but I didn't really grasp what an important thing it was.

"I think I really started appreciating Godzilla properly after watching Bong Joon-ho's *The Host*, which is a really terrific, emotional movie in the way that the monsters are used. It made me start thinking about monsters as a parable. I went back to *Godzilla* and I've been a devotee since that point."

A digital effects veteran with credits on everything from *Guardians Of The Galaxy* to *Deadpool 2*, Konrad's first professional engagement with Ol' Atomic Breath came with 2014's *Godzilla*, the film that launched Legendary's MonsterVerse. Returning for 2019's *Godzilla: King Of The Monsters*, he's now VFX supervisor on *Monarch: Legacy Of Monsters*, the Apple TV+ series that charts the decades-spanning story of the shadowy taskforce set up to tackle the MUTO menace. The screen may be smaller but the global threat remains supersized... →

GODZILLA

VFX SUPERVISOR SEAN KONRAD SHARES THE SECRETS OF GODZILLA'S TV TRIUMPH IN

MONARCH: LEGACY OF MONSTERS

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

There are two Godzilla models in the series.

A tough fight, but enough tasty meat for a month.

SFX: You've worked on two of the MonsterVerse movies. Is the Godzilla design in this show essentially the same we've seen on the big screen, or have there been tweaks?

SK: The way this all works is that once you finish a project the studio, Legendary, collects all the assets from the vendors who worked on it – the sub-contracted studios. It goes into an archive and what that contains is the model, the textures, reference imagery of what it looks like all around, the positions of the joints for animation and so on.

We see Godzilla in two different forms in the series: one the way he appears in the 2014 film and previous to that, and one after the events of that film, where his spines change after the damage they receive. And there are a few other tweaks in the model that are interesting. In the trailer there's a shot going up the dorsal fins, looking up towards his face. It's a really close shot on a part of Godzilla's body that you haven't seen with that version of the asset. For that one the vendor had to go in and do a little bit of detailing to the spines, to make it hold up to the resolution we needed for the shot.

Essentially you've got to keep continuity with the established MonsterVerse?

Exactly. You've got to keep continuity. We're between the films so there has to be a continuity that makes sense.

Is there part of you that wants to evolve Godzilla's design?

We talked about that as an option, but I think with where we are in it, that storytelling was not necessarily going to be possible. Is there an interest in it? Maybe, but overall I really like the 2014 design and I like the tweaks they made in the [2019] one, so for me I'm happy just to work on it and find cool new shots to do with it.

Do Toho always need to approve Godzilla's design?

Yeah, Toho's involved with it and now that he's designed they're really great collaborators. We'll have ideas and they'll make suggestions for how that could be improved, and they do that at an appropriate time, so it's not like this big wrench in the plans when you're trying to finish or anything like that. They're really great collaborators, and the same with Legendary. They have a really strong understanding of what we can and cannot do with the property, to make it feel grounded and consistent with the rest of the universe.

How would you define Godzilla's personality – and how does that inform the way he moves on screen?

He's very dramatic! Working on the 2014 film we went through a lot of iterations of speed and cadence, giving him that bulk and movement, but still occasionally letting him be a little more lithe and dexterous. In terms of personality, I feel like Godzilla is big and dramatic. He likes his big roars and that's a characterisation thing, roaring right at the camera and shaking everything around. He wants his moment in the spotlight!

But the other part is he's really deliberate with his movements. When he picks a target he is laser-focused, so he moves really directly. There's a term in animation called antic, which is anticipation. With animated characters you can go really big with antic, like Bugs Bunny – right before he does something he'll go really big on a movement. Godzilla's antics are pretty small. You get a little tension in the eye and some movement in the cheek.

Do you see Godzilla as a force of nature or is he a slightly more complex presence in this series?

Through the Godzilla pantheon he represents different things at different times. In the Legendary universe he is both a force of nature and a defender of the planet. And the defender of the planet can sometimes do things that are maybe bad for some of us insects in the way, right?

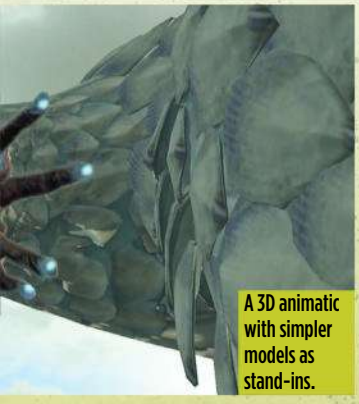
Is it purely 3D design and sculpture or are there physical maquette models?

On some of the films they have done maquettes, but on an episodic timeline the pre-production time is pretty limited, and something like a physical maquette takes 50% more time to do well. It's hard to iterate on

Raptors of a feather roar ferociously together.

"Ooh bloody hell run run run run run run run!"

If you think that's big, you should see the bath it's in.



A 3D animatic with simpler models as stand-ins.

"Ah, er. GOOD boy. Who's a good boy, then, eh?"

something that's physical, so you would do that as a finishing step.

With our process, it really depends on the artist and the team that you're working with. The majority of our creatures and a lot of our environment work was concepted by the wonderful Wētā FX team in New Zealand. Some of their artists are more comfortable working in 3D maquettes, in a modelling program, and then they'll go in and paint on top of that. Some of them are more like, "Oh, we'll do a sketch first," and then they'll do a speed-painting kind of thing.

What's great about working with a company like Wētā is they've got a roomful of people. I went to the office recently and they have walls just covered in things that they've all come up with, and they can bounce ideas off each other. If the task is not right for the person assigned to it they have somebody in the room who knows what to do.

It's communal creation?

One person might do a 3D thing, the other guy might do a quick illustration and go from there. Then once you've got something that's in the right ballpark you go in and do some detailing work on top of it. You'll take that concept and if it's done as a 2D illustration, Wētā would specifically give us a 3D model from that, like a really rough 3D model, and then that would go to the studio that's actually going to work on it. Usually a concept image is very illustrative. One of the creatures in episode one, for example, looked a little like a videogame model in the concept we had, but we had a whole bunch of reference imagery. Our production designer Caroline Hanania had shown me all these macro photographs of insects, and there's this amazing quality to the surface of their exoskeletons. We found this one beetle that has almost like a glittery orange effect, almost like a lacquer with a dark tone underneath. We would take those materials and basically give that as a reference to the vendor who was going to work on it, and they would make a physically based shader version of that and add variations to them.

How much do you think through the biology when designing?

A lot. It's the biology and also "What does the performance need to be?" We had a design for one of the creatures and we put it into a scene and post-vized it. We looked at it and said, "It's just not scary, man. It's just a little goofy." So you go back to the drawing board – literally – and you give the concept artist another round of "Okay, what if it had big, pointy teeth and more of an aggressive cheekbone structure?" and all of that kind of stuff. Make it darker and so on. All of those things that can amplify your sense of fear.

One of the trickiest creatures was the Frost Vark, the guy with the big tentacled mouth and the plated armour. In order to make the joints work properly, you need to make the size of the plates diminish towards where the knee and the metatarsal and the neck are, so that it can actually move around and not have all these things colliding and bouncing through each other and all that kind of stuff.

There are a lot of considerations, and a lot of the time the concept phase doesn't quite make sense when the rubber meets the road and you have to make the thing.

Are there any nods to the classic guy-in-a-suit aesthetic of the originals?

In the Legendary universe, within a realm of stylisation, you want it to feel like there's weight and scale in the movements. A big creature can move quickly, like an elephant can really run, but what typically happens is it takes a bit of time to get up to speed, and then it takes a lot of time to slow down. So the thing that really sells weight and scale isn't so much that it's moving slowly, lumbering or whatever, but that when it finishes moving the momentum continues to carry through.

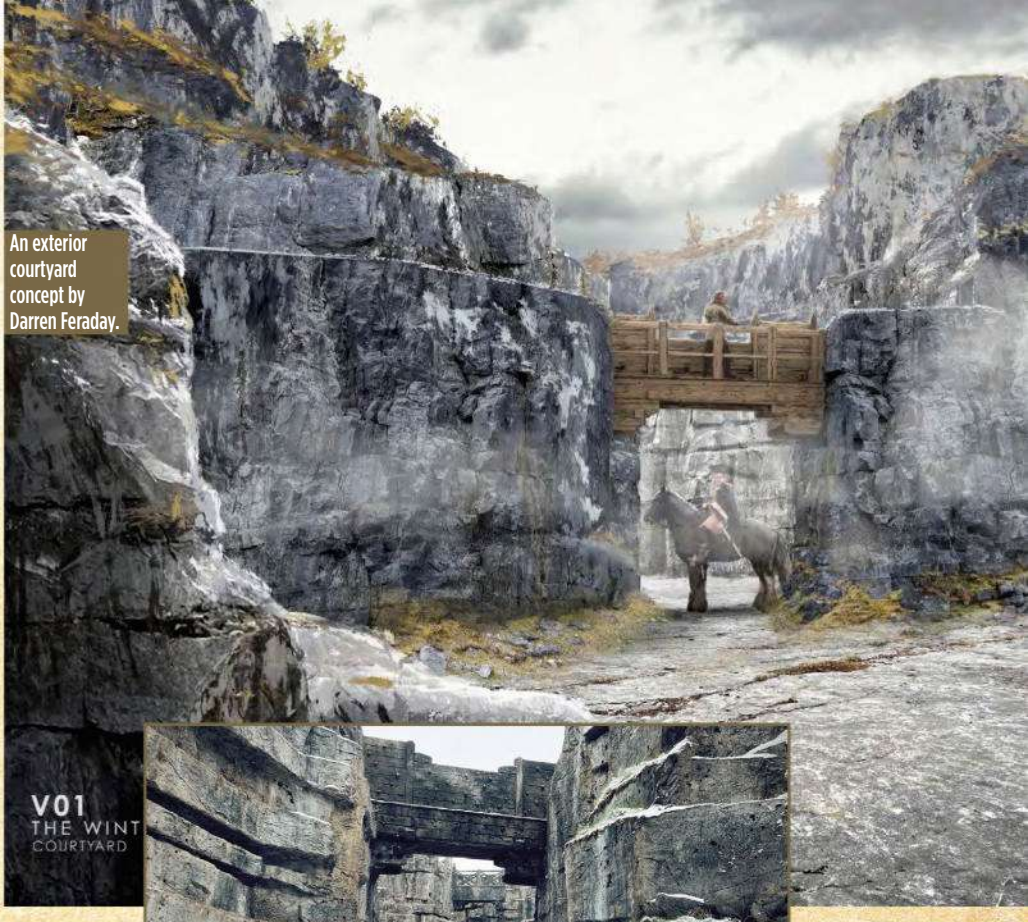
As for a guy in a suit, there's always a desire to do something a little more actiony than you should do, but we're always trying to ground it back towards something that's a little more plausible. That being said, every time Godzilla's tail moves it would be creating sonic booms! We fudge that a little bit!

Monarch: Legacy Of Monsters is on Apple TV+.

Designing THE WINTER KING

PRODUCTION DESIGNER JAMES NORTH DISCUSSES CREATING AN ARTHURIAN WORLD FOR ITVX'S ADAPTATION OF THE BERNARD CORNWELL NOVEL

WORDS: **IAN BERRIMAN**

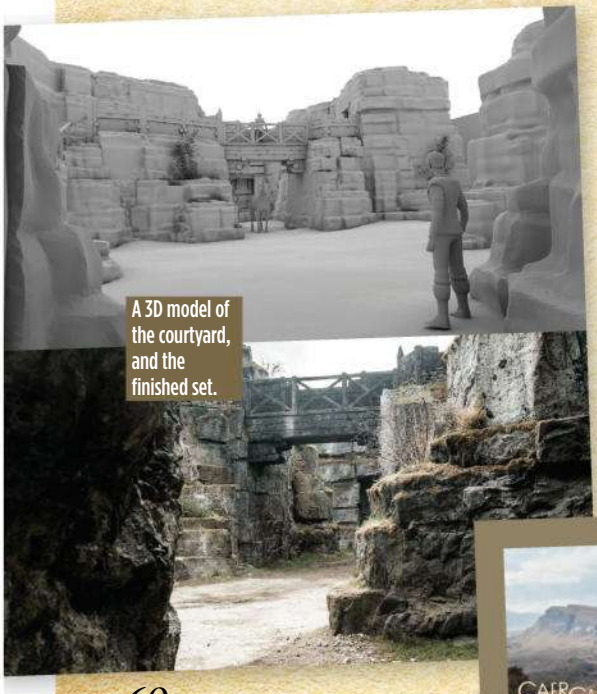


An exterior courtyard concept by Darren Feraday.

From first reading and initial chats with [lead director] Otto [Bathurst], we soon built a vision for the series. We're not blessed with huge amounts of reference regarding post-Roman, Dark Age Britain, but we had Bernard Cornwell's incredible novels – that's enough inspiration for anyone to work with. It was clear that the books would need serious adaptions to align with our time and financial restraints, so we set out world-building from the ground up. The world we created was grounded, visceral and raw. The series is a mix of the epic and the intimate, and I tried to mirror this within the environments. It was tough – like, really tough – reimagining a world so far from our own, and that so little is really known about.

ENTERING CAER CADARN

We attempted to blur the lines between location, set build and VFX. To do this we built an exterior courtyard on the backlot outside Patchway Studios in Bristol. We matched this closely to a quarry location in Merthyr Tydfil, where our gatehouse was built. Often, we film outside on location, then cut as we pass through the door into a studio set. But with Caer Cadarn we could lead straight through the roller shutter door of the studio into the underbelly of the Dumnonian seat of power. It blurs the line of where that cut is; we can move from outside through into internal tunnels.

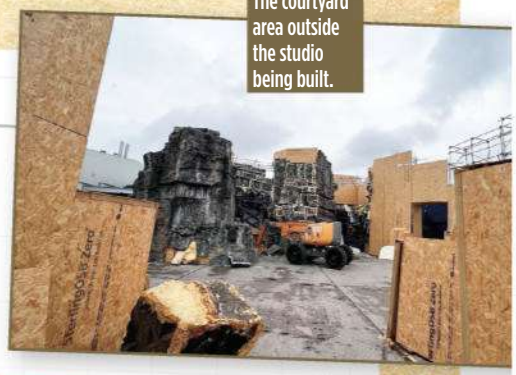


A 3D model of the courtyard, and the finished set.

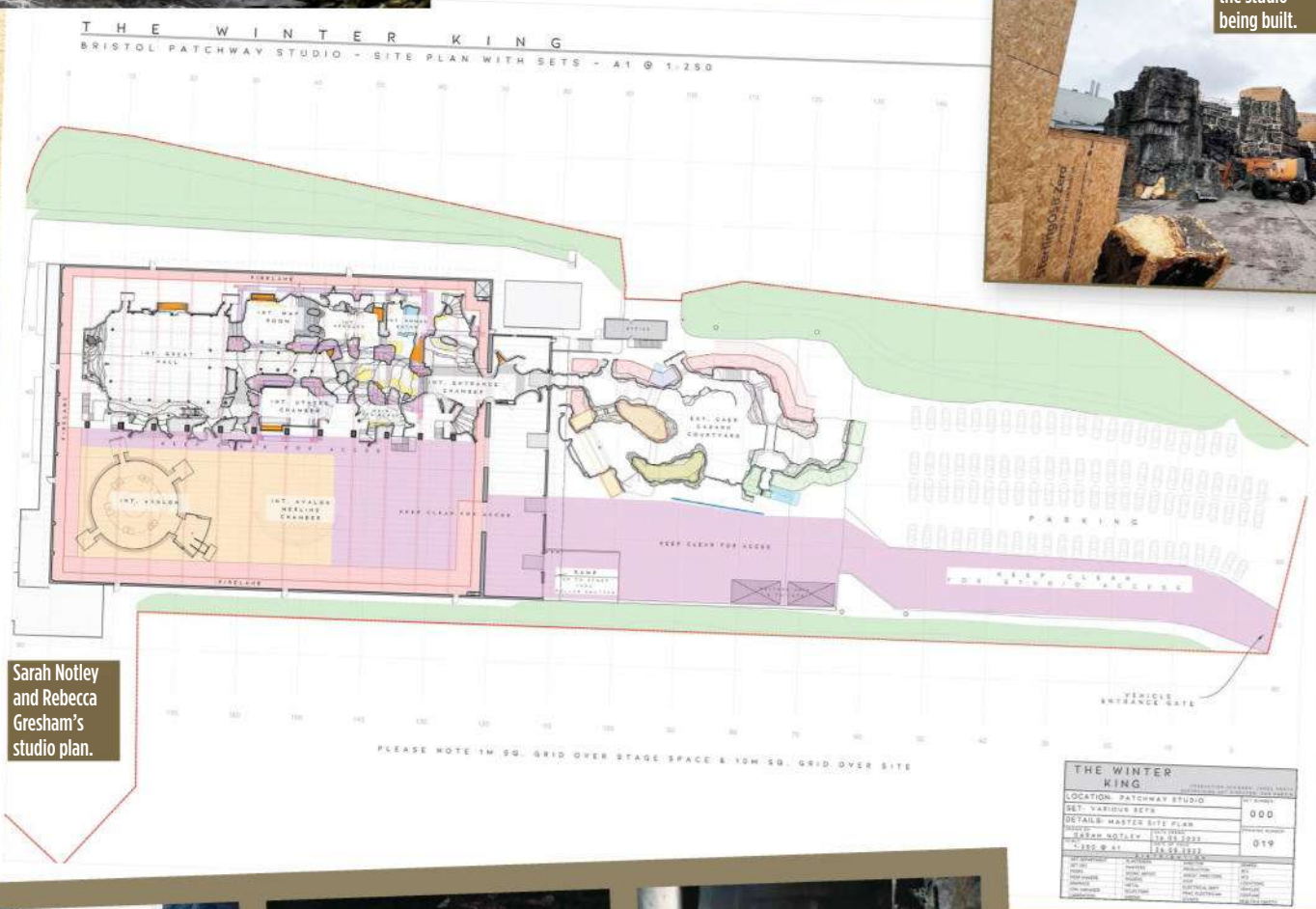
If you look *very* carefully, rock patterns repeat...

POPPADOM PIECES

Much of the construction was made with moulded foam panels that we lovingly call "poppadoms". These are pulls from eight foot by four foot moulds that we made at the exterior quarry by painting massive amounts of silicone onto a big slab of rock. These were pieced together, then hand-carved to form a seamless rock face. We used various grades of expanding foam to achieve this, ranging from standard DIY-style cans to huge machines that spray an epoxy mix from industrial barrels. This method enabled us to limit our texture library, and ensure consistency throughout the build, despite different rooms being constructed by different teams of sculptors. If you were making films 15 years ago it was all done in plaster, but plaster's horrible to work with: it's heavy, and it's always in the air. Whereas this insulation foam is a lot safer, because once it's sprayed it becomes non-toxic.



The courtyard area outside the studio being built.


THE WINTER KING
BRISTOL PATCHWAY STUDIO - SITE PLAN WITH SETS - A1 @ 1:250
PARKING
PLEASE NOTE 1M SQ. GRID OVER STAGE SPACE & 10M SQ. GRID OVER SITE
THE WINTER KING
LOCATION: PATCHWAY STUDIO
SET: VARIOUS SETS
DETAIL: MASTER SITE PLAN
SARAH NOTLEY
000
019

Sarah Notley and Rebecca Gresham's studio plan.

James North and his team drew on a "sort of texture library" of three different rock textures.

INSIDE CAER CADARN

Caer Cadarn developed into a timber and stone fortress cut into the rock of a brutal valley, taking inspiration from Castello di Mussomeli in Sicily. Set extensions were designed to give subtle depth, but it was predominantly practical, a composite set stretching nearly 130 metres exterior and interior. Visually, it had some clear rules: straight vertical and horizontal lines dominate the spaces; heavy and unfinished surfaces mimic those of modern brutalist architecture; adornments were kept few and far between, instead using the natural beauty of the rock texture to "decorate" our spaces. It's a minimal world where everything has a purpose – no piles of hay or random oak barrels. The topography of the set is its main triumph. To achieve this we laid 250 tonnes of aggregate, allowing us to create the gradients required, and move us away from feeling like we're on a flat studio floor.

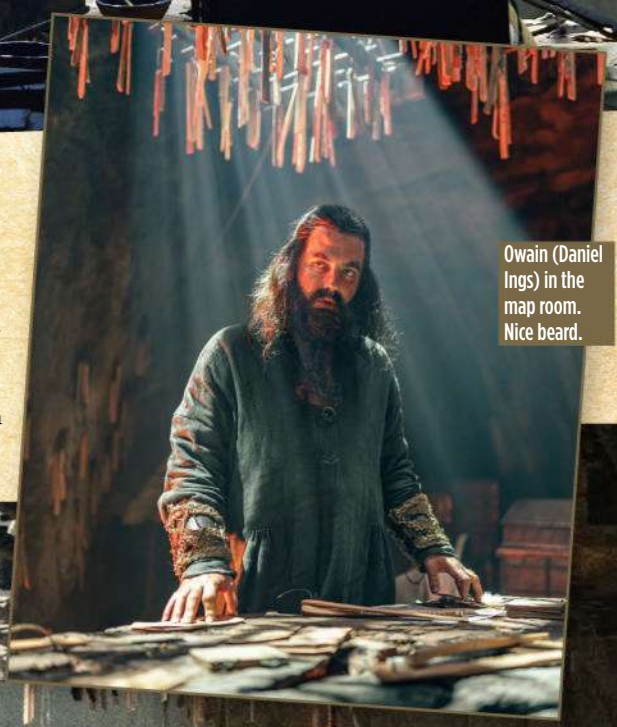
Looks great here, but less fancy if you look up!

FEEL MIGHTY REAL

All the things we call touch points, that the actors interact with, are real timber and real metal. So the floors are hard, the doors have all got weight to them, to give everybody the best possible chance of feeling like they're in a real cave. It's not just important for the actors – it's just as important for the crew, so everybody feels absorbed in it. There's a finite amount of money, so the key is making sure we spend it in the right places. In order for everyone to feel like they're in a cave, we've got to build a bit of a ceiling. But then the stuff that we use on the ceilings, which we don't see in as much detail, is just polystyrene which has a bit of methylated spirits on it, which breaks up the shape – so when you look up it looks like a right dog's dinner. Often, when you get into any film set and look up, it looks like a pantomime set!

THE MAP ROOM

This is the epicentre of the Dumnonian kingdom, where a lot of important decisions happen. It works like a tax office. Historically, tally sticks were their way of keeping note of what tax everybody had paid. It was basically a notch system. It would have the name of the family group on it, and one slit is for a fleece, a V shape is for a bag of grain, or whatever. Ours were made out of old baguette-proofing trays. When they proved baguettes in France, they used these long, scooped-out timber things. Nowadays they use plastic, so if you go to antiques markets on the continent there's a lot of these strange long, shallow bowls. They're nice, cheap old timber. We cut them through with a rip saw, and jigsawed little things out of them.



Owain (Daniel Ings) in the map room. Nice beard.

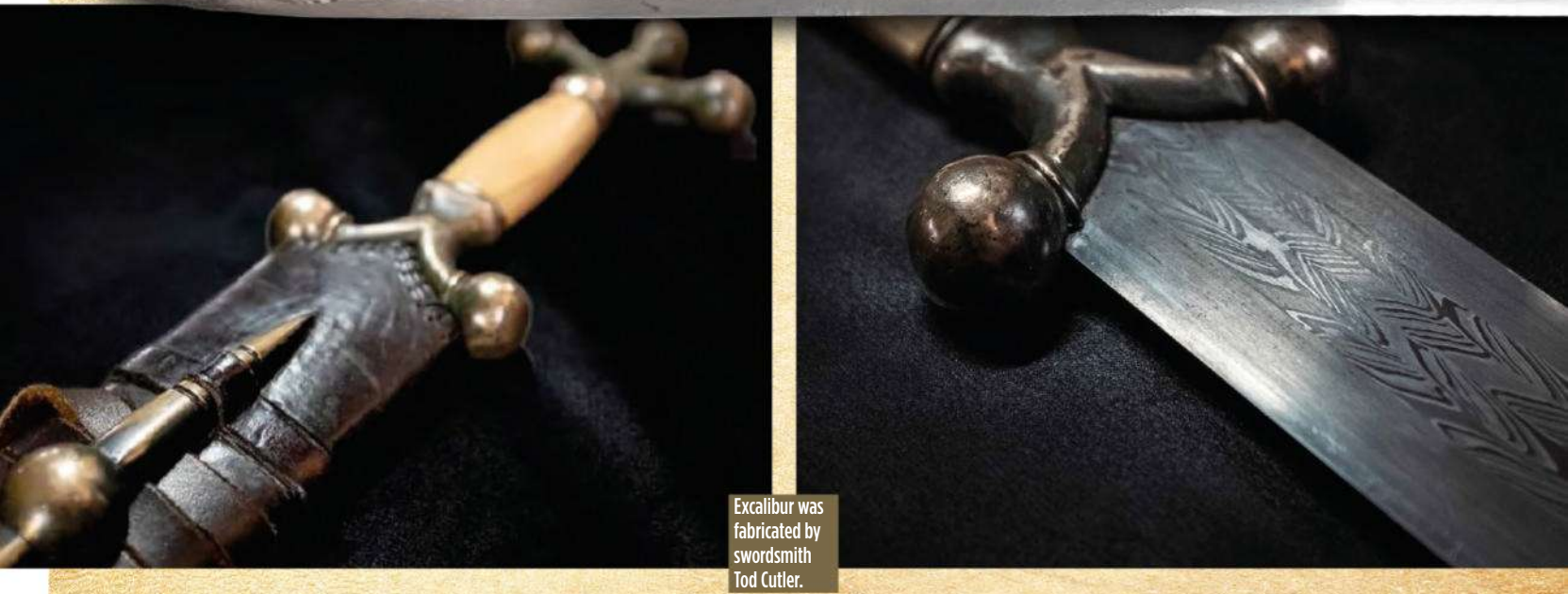
James used his loaf and didn't spend much bread.

INT MAP ROOM

THE GREAT HALL

In the Great Hall we used huge blocks of timber, hewn into shape with axes and adzes, giving a dappled texture. The height of the benches harks more to East Asian traditions, as opposed to the more traditional high-backed heavy furniture synonymous with Arthurian legend. That helps slightly stylise the way we see the characters, and levels the playing field a bit, so everybody's equal. In the books, it describes the Great Hall as full of this thick, acrid smoke, and we did put quite a lot of smoke in. One of the unsung heroes of that set is the view over the valley from the huge letterbox fissure in the rock. Assuming that we'd always have to replace the view in post, we printed a temporary backdrop, but it was so good that, apart from the occasional bird flying past, it was rarely tampered with. It was a combination of great lighting and the consistent level of smoke achieved by our SFX crew.

See that view at the back? Just a printed backdrop.



Excalibur was fabricated by swordsmith Tod Cutler.

Great Hall concept art by Darren Feraday.

A 3D model of the Great Hall set, by Sarah Notley.

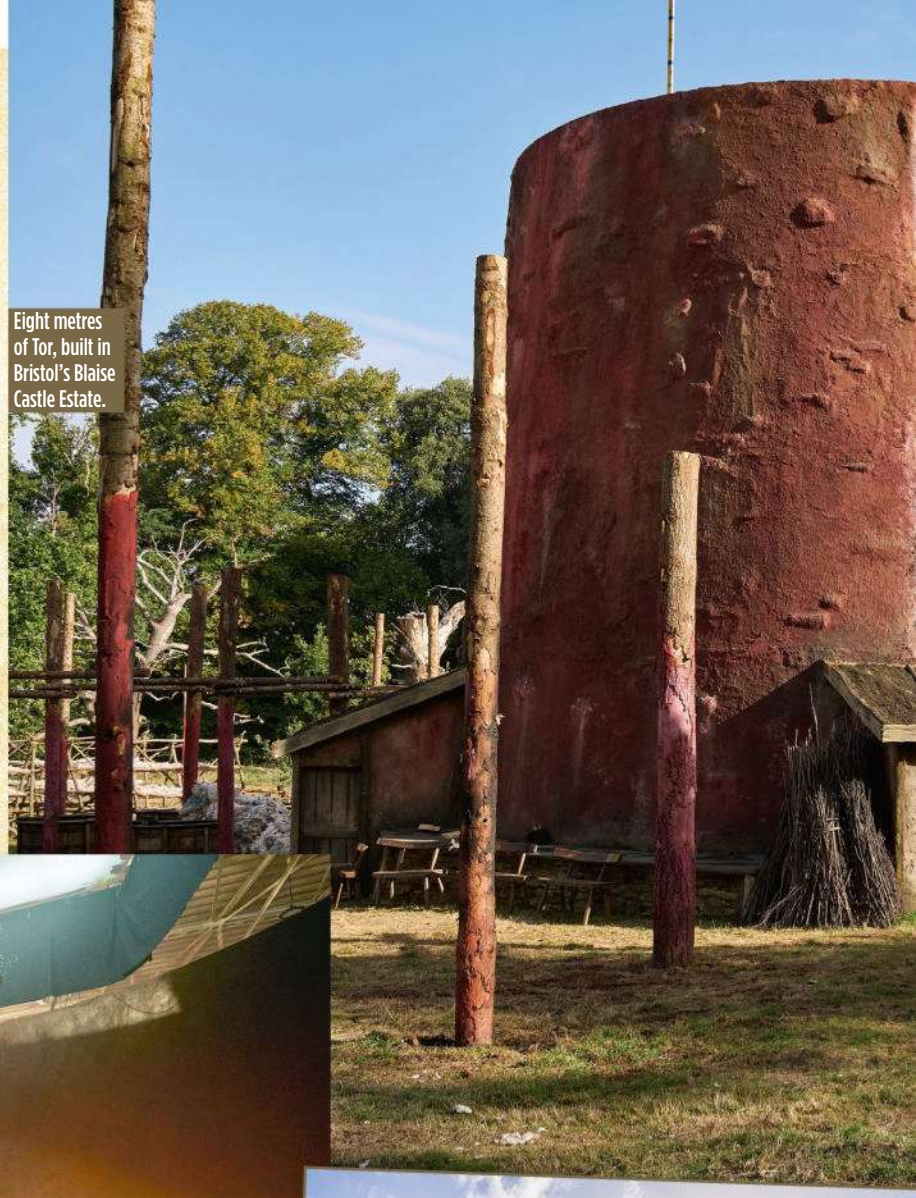
EXCALIBUR

We tried to steer away from that medieval, over-the-top shininess, which is so easy to fall into – that's not the period of our show. Excalibur is very much a sword of the period. It's based on an anthropomorphic sword – one with a hilt like a human form – of the Celtic era, which would have been common in the third and fourth century. We've got an armourer that we worked with to make the master sword, then we moulded it in-house and made various versions. The sword which the leader of the Silurians uses, which is basically just a steel blade, would have been very weak, and would snap. Whereas a pattern-welded sword like this, which is folded alloys, all welded together, would be really strong. The blade itself took one man four weeks to make – they're skilled craftspeople. A sword would have been your most valuable possession – it would have been like having a fancy Gucci handbag!

MERLIN'S TOR

The outside of the Tor was a partially practical build in a municipal park down the road, with a VFX extension. As well as being Merlin's home, it's very much a communal space, like a village hall. It's supposed to feel quite church-like. The idea was that the building was built around the stones. Big round houses of the period were often like this. There's one down in Dorset at the Ancient Technology Centre that's very much the same – it's like an amphitheatre, although theirs is earth-sheltered and only about 10 feet high, whereas ours is more like Scottish castles of a similar period in its shape. The actual castles of the period were all timber – the Scottish were the only ones who really built anything out of stone around this period – so we've got no examples of what they looked like, but it's not impossible for it to have been built.

All 10 episodes of The Winter King are now available on ITVX and MGM+.

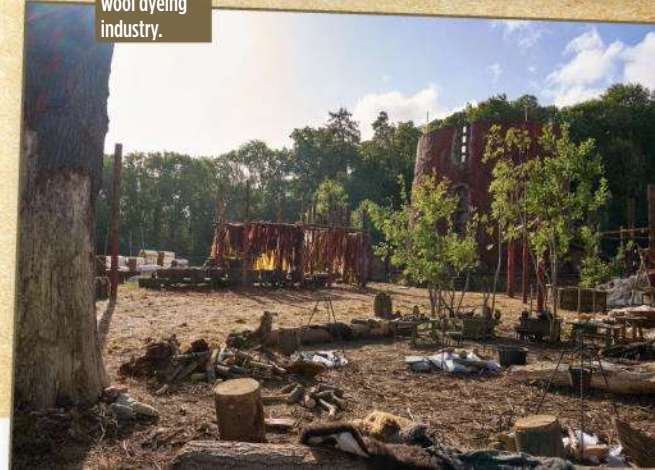


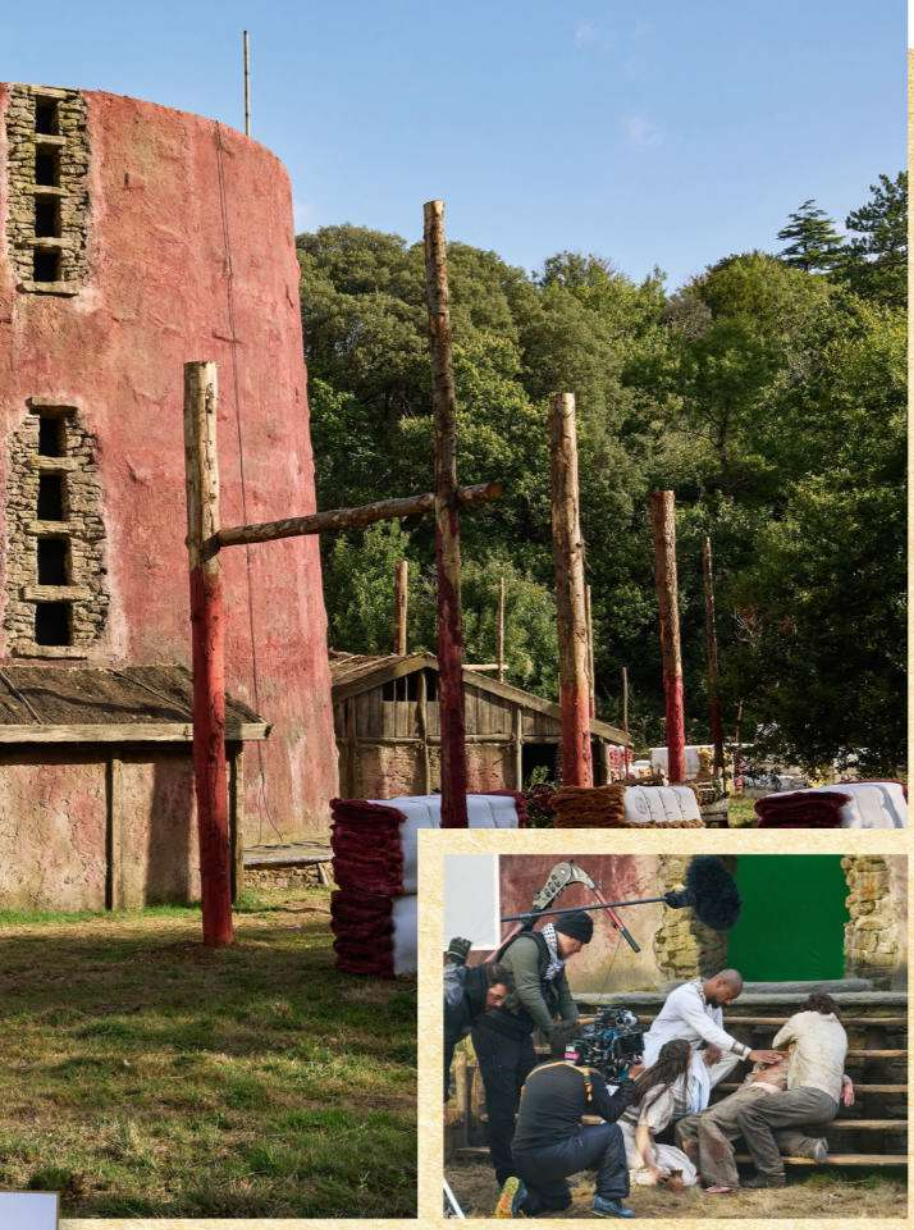
Eight metres of Tor, built in Bristol's Blaise Castle Estate.

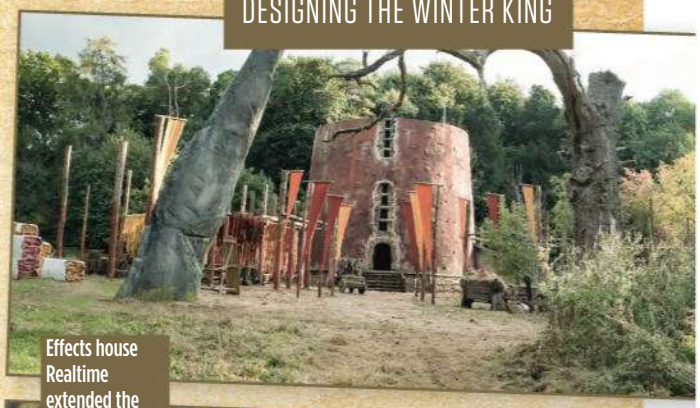
Behind the scenes on the filming of episode eight.

Outside the Tor: Avalon's wool dyeing industry.

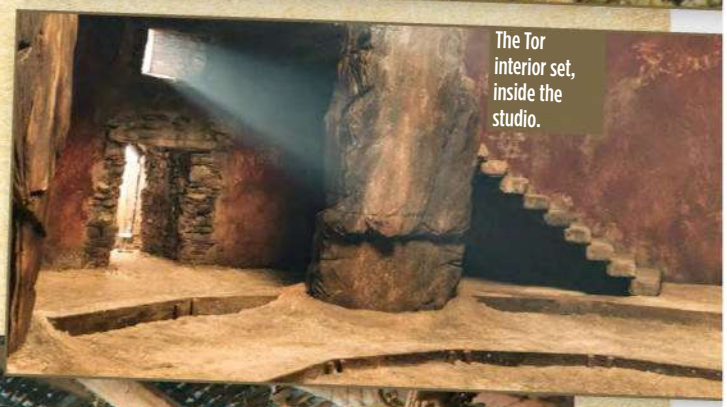
VFX were used to place Avalon in the countryside.







Effects house Realtime extended the Tor by 15 metres.



The Tor interior set, inside the studio.

Merlin's chamber. He's a big fan of bones, clearly.

ALIEN ENCOUNTERS OF THE FRIENDLY KIND

PRODUCTION DESIGNER JOE ALVES TAKES US BEHIND THE SCENES OF STEVEN SPIELBERG'S 1977 SCIENCE FICTION CLASSIC

WORDS: **OLIVER PFEIFFER**

"I REALLY FOUND MY FAITH WHEN I heard that the government was opposed to the film. If NASA took the time to write me a 20-page letter, then I knew there must be something happening," director and self-proclaimed UFO fanatic Steven Spielberg once said, regarding the impetus for making his 1977 epic *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*.

Originally envisaged as a low-budget sci-fi movie titled *Watch The Skies* that was inspired by his childhood memories of witnessing a spectacular meteor shower, *Close Encounters* ultimately took its philosophy and elongated title from the 1972 book *The UFO Experience: A Scientific Inquiry*.

Written by astronomer and former UFO skeptic turned advocate Dr J Allen Hynek, the book stated that a Close Encounter of the First Kind was a UFO sighting with no evidence; the Second Kind was where a UFO leaves physical evidence, and the Third was when actual contact was made. Appropriately, Spielberg hired Hynek as a scientific consultant to lend legitimacy to proceedings.

Drawing on elements of his 1964 UFO home movie *Firelight*, Spielberg wrote this very personal project himself. It focuses on frustrated father Roy Neary (Richard Dreyfuss), an electrical engineer whose confrontation with a UFO overturns his everyman existence. Suddenly, Roy's inner child is unleashed as he becomes strangely obsessed with recreating the inexplicable →

Roy and Jillian finally make it to Devils Tower.

These aliens were played by young local girls.

vision of what turns out to be Devils Tower, a unique geological formation.

"I was told, 'You need to find a strange-looking mountain," Joe Alves, the Oscar-nominated production designer on *Close Encounters* tells *SFX*. "So I drove 3,000 miles looking for strange-looking mountains, and came across Devils Tower in Wyoming. It was so incredibly unusual that it seemed to be the earmark for the movie."

"The second thing was where the mothership was going to land. In the script it was just a big military encampment in the desert," continues Alves. "My thinking was this was a huge important global event where a big spaceship is going to come down and communicate, so we should have some control over the area. I wanted it to look extremely organised."

After Alves made a model of the climactic event, he realised that it would have to be on a much larger scale than the two allocated sound stages at Columbia allowed. Fortunately, the budget on *Close Encounters* ballooned as a result of the success of *Jaws*, which Alves had also worked on as production designer.

"There's nothing like having a big successful movie to enlarge your own new project," he says. "I made the models to fit those two stages and all the executives came into my office with Steven and said, 'What do you think?'. I said, 'I think it's too small and should be four times that. This is a huge event; we need to have some scope'. Douglas Trumbull was doing the special effects, so we needed to have it in an enclosure to accommodate [that]. When they asked, 'Where are you going to build it?' I said, 'I don't have a clue; it's so big – it's 300 feet by 450 feet – like a couple of football fields!"

After some unsuccessful location scouting, two hangars were ultimately found in Wyoming, Alabama to facilitate this colossal base of operations. The Ohio-set Neary family home and its suburban neighbourhood, where an erratic Roy memorably attempts to recreate his mountainous premonition, presented another challenge, however.

"We went to Ohio and looked at some of these small residential areas, and they didn't have any fences. In other words, you could look into one backyard from the other and people would be barbecuing and would be able to wave at you," recalls Alves.

"Then, in Mobile, Alabama I found a new community building that Steven and I thought was the perfect house, but it was owned by this big corporation. People said, 'You're going to have to buy it', but the studio said, 'We're not buying any house!' So Steven said, 'Well, we'll buy it and rent it to them.' As soon as we told the studio, they went, 'No, no, if you're going to buy it then we're going to buy it!'"

Although his initial designs for the mammoth mothership (based on concept art

BOLDLY GOING WHERE NO ONE SHOULD...

Was revealing the inside of the mothership a close encounter too far?

"Steven was unhappy with the movie and he released the *Special Edition* and it really bothered me," says Joe Alves. "When Richard Dreyfuss is with Melinda [Dillon] at the end, and he goes off in the spaceship after her little boy comes running out, that was so touching. She grabs the little boy and he goes 'Goodbye', and the spaceship closes and that's the end of the movie.

"For the *Special Edition*, Steven decided to go inside the spaceship, and it looked like a Holiday Inn where you go to this lobby [with] all these weird creatures looking down. I thought, 'Why are we in the spaceship?'"

Due to his dissatisfaction with the original version of *Close Encounters*, Spielberg had requested that the studio allow him to work on a Director's Cut. However, in order to fund this 1980 *Special Edition*, the studio insisted on shooting a sequence where Roy Neary is seen inside the mothership, to act as a hook to sell the new version. It was a sequence that Spielberg later regretted shooting.

In 1998 the filmmaker released the definitive 137-minute Director's Cut. It restored the previously trimmed scenes of Roy's frantic homemade recreation of Devils Tower, but omitted the mothership interior, wisely leaving those wonders to the imagination.

"Now hang on, where have I seen that before?"

Roy gets "probed" by a passing alien ship.

To coin a phrase, you ain't seen nothing yet...

by *Star Wars* illustrator Ralph McQuarrie) weren't used, Alves did come up with the "blinding light" visual concept as the colossal craft opens up. "I brought Steven into my art room, turned off all the lights and put on the music to *2001: A Space Odyssey* to create an atmosphere," explains Alves.

"Then I took my desk lamp, put it down and set it in place and said, 'The mothership lands and then suddenly it opens. As it opens you could see this surgical sliver of light.' He said, 'That's incredible – how did you come up with that?' I replied, 'It was one night and probably a few Scotches!'"

Douglas Trumbull, who'd worked on the ground-breaking visual effects for *2001*, was responsible for bringing the alien spacecraft to staggering life through sophisticated practical models. He utilised a then-revolutionary Digital Live Action Recording System that overcame the previously static flying saucer camera shots of yesteryear. Originally the UFO spacecraft were to emulate popular fluorescent signs, such as those of McDonald's and the 76 chain of petrol stations. However, this evolved into more obliquely presented beams of light that represented objects such as semitrailers, an overturned oxygen mask and an approaching Boeing 747 without the fuselage.

"Once Doug got involved, all that was done in post-production. We didn't have CGI back then but we had some stuff that came very close to it," remembers Alves. "One of the effects guys said, 'We could CGI this' and I said, 'CGI – what is that?' Well, it was computer generated imagery but it took 72 hours to get one image. That was 1977, so it was very early CGI."

Undoubtedly, another major contribution to *Close Encounters* was composer John Williams's score. His now iconic five-note melody, (selected out of hundreds of other permutations) served as the climatic communication method between humans and aliens. To accompany the tune, Joe Alves designed the massive coloured note/score board memorably used to converse with the mothership.

"I'd played piano for years and was thinking about Schoenberg's twelve-tone [technique] and decided there's going to be these 12 rectangle units," he reveals. "I figured, when you start learning piano you start with middle C, and that was yellow as it was bright. I progressed from yellow all the way to purple. We then wired everything to go to the keyboard so you could literally play the colour of the sound. From a design standpoint it was an incredibly fun and interesting thing to do."

Portraying Lacombe, the pragmatic French government scientist who oversees the UFO endeavours, was renowned French New Wave filmmaker François Truffaut, responsible for such seminal classics as *The 400 Blows*.

"We got François and he was great. He spoke English sometimes and was perfect for the role. It was interesting, because George Lucas came onto the big set and said, 'Oh my god, we never did anything like this on *Star Wars*, we just built these small sets and kept repainting them.' So he was very impressed. Then I said, 'Let's see what François Truffaut thinks about the big set' and he came on and said nothing," laughs Alves.

> **"We didn't have CGI back then but we had some stuff that came very close to it"**

"Then Steven wanted me to build this little motel set for his character, who's staying in Mexico. I [built] a television set and this little motel room, and outside I had a neon cactus. Anyway, it was a modest set. Truffaut walked in and said, 'Oh my god, this is a great set!' So, I thought, 'That's just the way he thinks: small and more intimate.'"

Although a summer 1978 release was originally planned, due to Columbia Pictures' financial troubles at the time the premiere of *Close Encounters* was brought forward to November 1977. It nevertheless became a box office success; however, Spielberg was unhappy with the relatively rushed production and a *Special Edition* was subsequently released in 1980, with mixed results.

Despite such tinkering, the original version remains a spiritual classic of science fiction cinema, and more than 46 years on from its original release, *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*'s sense of awe and wonder remains.

Close Encounters Of The Third Kind is available on DVD, Blu-ray and 4K.

Dreyfuss with François Truffaut and Spielberg.

ALAMY

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

SAARA EL-ARIFI

Reimagining fantasy: meet one of the brightest new stars in the genre

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Mustafa Raee

THE WAY FORWARD, SAARA EL-ARIFI DECIDED, was to risk failing big. So it was that, as an unpublished novelist, she submitted to an agent she calls "the biggest dealmaker in Europe", Juliet Mushens. It paid off. "I think she gets 700 queries a week, but she came back to me in 10 minutes and said, 'Can I have the whole manuscript?'"

Life since has been a "whirlwind", partly set in motion by El-Arifi's own fierce work ethic. Her third novel *Faebound*, the opening volume in a new trilogy, follows swiftly on the heels of two instalments in her Ending Fire trilogy. "My ambition is unparalleled," she tells *SFX* and, while she's more than self aware enough to deliver this line in a self-deprecating way, there's clearly a grain of truth in it.

So why did her debut *The Final Strife* attract so much attention? At least in part, she says, it was because, after 14 years of trying to get published, she questioned why she'd been writing a book "where the main character was a white man". Looking around on the Tube one day, she realised that her bookshelves, filled with fantasy novels, didn't reflect London's diversity. "My superpower is being black," she says, "and I didn't know that. When I actually sat down and wrote the novel that I should have been writing from the very start, I wrote it in four months."

While, she says, *The Final Strife* deals with "black pain", *Faebound* is about "black joy" – albeit with a certain amount of uber-violence thrown in. "[A friend] was like, '300 people die in the first chapter.' I was like, 'Yeah, but it gets better, it's fine.'"

A TALE OF TWO SISTERS

The book's central relationship is between two sisters: Yeeran, an elven colonel, and Lettle, a diviner who catches glimpses of the future. But these aren't the mystical elves of Tolkien. Instead, these are sisters living through a never-ending war. Once, the elves shared their world with fae and humans, but these species are now the stuff of myth. A catastrophic career move leads to the duo discovering that legends can sometimes be true...

The trilogy, she says, plays with ideas of "erasure" and hidden realms. "The woodland fairy creatures of West Africa were something I looked into," adds El-Arifi, who has an MA in African Studies. "There's an idea this was a story implanted during colonisation, but there's evidence that's not the case."

There's tension between the two sisters but also love. "I think there's something magical about siblings, sibling rivalry, and also those inane arguments that you have, that are so stupid but so funny at the same time," El-Arifi says of a book that's dedicated to her own younger sister. One of the images in it is of two sisters fused together by the scars of their lives, the marks of poverty in early life. "A scar is not a good thing, but it is a healing thing," she adds.

As for her own upbringing, El-Arifi's official bio describes her as having "a DNA profile that lights up like a satellite photograph of Earth". She was initially raised in the Middle East, in Abu Dhabi. "My dad was a horse vet for the sheikh in the UAE," she says. But the work was stressful, and the family relocated to "a village outside of Sheffield".

SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

This was quite a shock. While El-Arifi was initially excited at the thought of school dinners, which she'd learned about in international school – "It was always pink custard, and I didn't understand why it was pink, but it was great" – she discovered there were downsides to life in the UK. On her first day of secondary school, "someone used the 'n' word. And I had never heard it before. I didn't know what it was."

Fitting in was tough. "I spent so much time trying to assimilate," she remembers. "Even until my early thirties, I was still straightening my hair." It was through writing, she says, that she came to understand the racism she faced. From a young age, she liked to create "make-believe worlds", sharing these with her sister, who "spent a lot of time in hospital" as a youngster. "Stories are what allowed us to escape the moment."

At other times, El-Arifi's gift for invention led to trouble, as when she gave a school presentation about her horse. She didn't actually own a horse, couldn't even ride, but raided her father's files for a picture of a purebred that was probably worth millions. "There was a 'horse girl' in the audience. She was like, 'I don't think that was your horse...'" Like any good storyteller should, El-Arifi doubled down.

After school she travelled, working in Switzerland and Ghana, where she taught in the school her great-grandfather built. She went to university in Canterbury and studied theatre, before moving to London, where she worked in film marketing, including at Pinewood. "There's nowhere I feel more invisible," she says of the capital, "and that's such a joy to me, to be able to just walk around and not feel like I stand out." Better to let her talent be seen through her writing.

BIODATA

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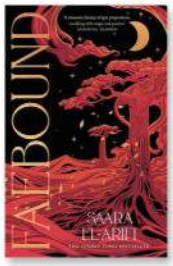
Greatest Hits
***The Final Strife* (2022) was a bestseller, and the trilogy continued with 2023's *The Battle Drum*.**

Random Fact
El-Arifi lives in Harrow, and often meets up with fellow authors for lunch and working sessions – she name-checks Samantha Shannon and Tasha Suri as friends.



Faebound is out now, published by HarperVoyager.

> I think there's something magical about siblings and those inane arguments you have

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FEBRUARY 2024

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edited by Ian Berriman

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AQUAMAN AND THE LOST KINGDOM

Sorry, the Curry's off

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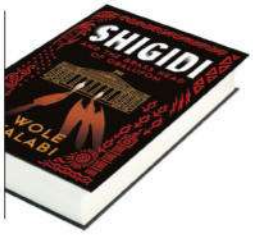
Highlights

78 DOCTOR WHO

→ We slip on a kilt, a crop-top and a biker jacket to rewatch "The Church On Ruby Road".

80 COFFIN JOE

→ A new Blu-ray box set collects Brazilian filmmaker José Mojica Marins's outrageous oeuvre.



87 SHIGIDI

→ A god tries to steal an artefact from the British Museum in Wole Talabi's impressive debut.

→ RATINGS EXPLAINED ★★★★★ SUPERB ★★★★☆ GOOD ★★★☆☆ AVERAGE ★★☆☆☆ POOR ★☆☆☆☆ TERRIBLE

"They'll never see me behind this." Ah, bless 'im.

AQUAMAN AND THE LOST KINGDOM

Wet Wet Wet

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
12A | 124 minutes
Directors **James Wan**
Cast **Jason Momoa, Patrick Wilson, Yahya Abdul-Mateen II, Nicole Kidman**

It's tempting to imagine a pirate's curse was placed upon this tardy sequel to 2018's wildly successful *Aquaman*, with rumours of major reshoots, rumblings of a fractious set and a release date bumped back by an entire year. On arrival it finds itself the final, dying remnant of the original Snyderverse, overshadowed by anticipation for how James Gunn will reshape the DC pantheon on the big screen.

All connective tissue to the wider franchise has already been snipped away. For once there are no multiverse-bending Bat-cameos, not a hint of the rawk guitar riff that always cued a welcome injection of Gal Gadot. Any trace of Zack Snyder's dour, desaturated vision is long gone. Where once there were Wagnerian smackdowns between sullen spandex gods, we now have cheap sight-gags of babies weeing in the face of the King of Atlantis. These days Jason Momoa's Aquaman suit shimmers like a green and orange disco.

It may feel carefully quarantined from all that's come before, but this is very much part two of its own story. A frighteningly intense Yahya Abdul-Mateen II encores as Black Manta, now scouring the oceans in search of the fabled Seventh Kingdom and ancient tech that will bestow the power of "dark magic", even at the cost of the seas themselves. This quest sets up a backstory that also allows for some well-meaning but heavy-handed environmental messaging.

Also back is Patrick Wilson as Aquaman's half-brother Orm, modestly known as Ocean Master. Pairing an uptight, painfully earnest Wilson with Momoa's Guinness-quaffing biker bro should, by rights, deliver buddy movie gold – director James Wan is on record as aiming for *Tango & Cash* – but the comedy is strained, here and elsewhere. Topo, Aquaman's octopus sidekick in the comics, promises to be an amusing scene-stealer but ends up bafflingly underused.

> **"The final, dying remnant of the original Snyderverse"**

Sweeping us from what the captions label "Somewhere in the Atlantic" to "Somewhere in the South Pacific", Wan occasionally summons a pleasingly old-school adventure film vibe. There's a vintage touch of Ray Harryhausen to a sequence set on a jungle island of mutant flora and fauna, complete with colossal grasshoppers. And while the overload of digital eye candy is cumulatively numbing, much of the design work is imaginative, from a fishy take on the *Star Wars* cantina to steampunk-style submersibles, propelled by whirling tentacles.

Momoa's casting remains one of the lasting triumphs of the Snyderverse but even his bullish, outsized charisma can't save this underpowered swansong. It ends with a whoop and a literal mic drop, but for all the epic, ocean-spanning ambition on display it's the sound of a movie universe swilling quietly down the plughole.

Nick Setchfield

i Michael Keaton and then later Ben Affleck shot appearances as Batman, but none of the footage made the final cut.

NIGHT SWIM

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 98 minutes
Director **Bryce McGuire**
Cast **Kerry Condon, Wyatt Russell, Nancy Lenehan, Amélie Hoeferle**

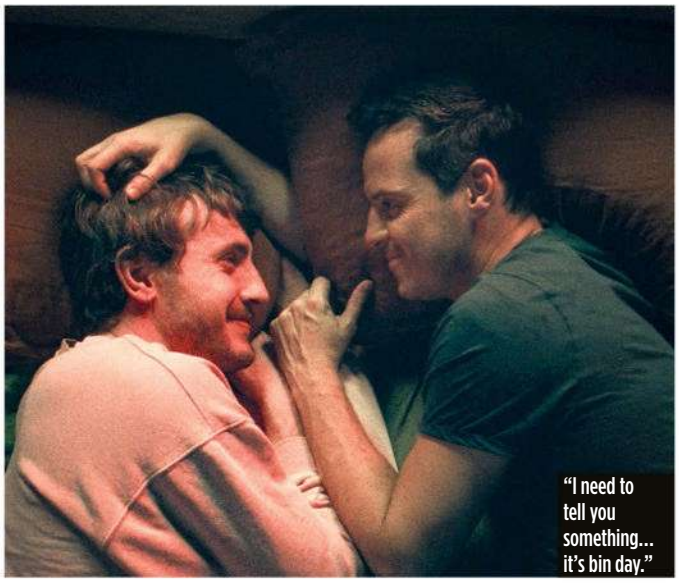
In the past year or so, Blumhouse has brought us a killer doll, a scary creature in the closet and some haunted animatronics, to name but a few. So why not a spooky swimming pool? Writer/director Bryce McGuire, here adapting the short he created with Rod Blackhurst, pitches the idea of a family moving into a home boasting a backyard pool with a dodgy history.

Early on, as you can guess if you've seen the trailer, the film follows the predictable jump-scare route (it'll certainly make you rethink playing Marco Polo in a darkened body of water, though that's probably not a good plan anyway). But as the story moves on, *Night Swim* starts to show some depths, and a few good ideas begin to float to the surface.

As dad Ray Waller, the baseball player struggling with a debilitating condition who initially sees some *Cocoon*-style benefits from the water, Wyatt Russell (Kurt's son, doncha know) dives into the role. But it's Kerry Condon as his wife Eve, a school administration worker, who ultimately takes over the load as the mystery begins to reveal itself.

McGuire infuses the film with some decent humour to offset the terror. So while *Night Swim* is hardly a classic, and doesn't possess *M3GAN*'s energy, it's at least not too shallow when it comes to the characters.

James White



ALL OF US STRANGERS

SFX Loves

Memory Bank of Mum and Dad

★★★★★

RELEASED 26 JANUARY
15 | 105 minutes
Director **Andrew Haigh**
Cast **Andrew Scott, Paul Mescal, Jamie Bell, Claire Foy**

A fantastical premise is handled with complete sincerity and naturalism in Andrew Haigh's moving, soulful and erotically charged drama. Based on a novel by the late Japanese author Taichi Yamada, it's a tale of love, loss and loneliness with a Shyamalan-ish twist, anchored throughout by a career-best performance from *Sherlock*'s Andrew Scott.

Writer Adam (Scott) lives alone in a near-empty London tower block, labouring on a script about the parents he lost when he was 11. Returning on a whim to the house in the suburbs he left decades ago, hes amazed to find his mum (Claire Foy) and dad (Jamie Bell) still there in unaged situ, just as he knew them before the car crash that killed them. The lure of the past is powerful as Adam gets to spend time with (and come out to) these spectres of his loved ones. But could it be inhibiting too, not least if it stops him committing to a new relationship in the present with charming neighbour Harry (Paul Mescal)?

Like all good ghost stories, Haigh's has spine-tingling surprises in store for both his hero

> **"A tale of love, loss and loneliness"**

and the viewer. Yet the real surprise is how much heartfelt emotion it also conveys as Adam gradually fathoms the life-enhancing value of meaningful human connection.

A soundtrack crammed with '80s bangers adds a rich coating of nostalgia to a film that doesn't need effects (or a DeLorean) to step back in time. **Neil Smith**

i Director Andrew Haigh used his own childhood home as the house where Adam is reunited with his parents.

OUT OF DARKNESS

★★★½☆

RELEASED 9 FEBRUARY
TBC | 97 minutes
Director **Andrew Cumming**
Cast **Safia Oakley-Green, Chuku Modu, Kit Young, Iola Evans**

As an elusive, unseen presence picks off a group of hunters lost among the trees you might imagine you've stumbled upon the stealthiest of stealth prequels to *The Predator* (spoiler: it's not).

Pitching a primitive culture against seemingly superior power, Andrew Cumming's feature debut has unmistakable echoes of 2022's *Prey*, but this proves an altogether bleaker, rawer take on a historical survivalist thriller.

Rewinding the millennia to 45,000 BCE, it finds a ruthless young tribesman leading his fellow Stone Age wanderers in search of a promised land, only to discover a barren realm where shrieking demons wait in the shadows to bump up the body count.

Played with absolute conviction – even as the cast contend with an ancient language, helpfully subtitled – the film fully commits to its stark, chilly tone, pushing its flint-striking protagonists to the edge of mortality. The desaturated paleolithic landscapes have a brutal beauty and you feel every breath of wind in the furs. When darkness inevitably falls the loss of light is terrifying.

It's a story about monsters – but one that's more concerned with the nature of monsters and the tales we tell about *the other*. A bone-chiller of a campfire fable, it reminds us we've been telling this story for a long time. **Nick Setchfield**

DOCTOR WHO: THE CHURCH ON RUBY ROAD

All That They Want (Is Another Baby)

★★★½☆

- UK **BBC One, now on iPlayer**
- US **Streaming on Disney+**
- Showrunner **Russell T Davies**
- Cast **Ncuti Gatwa, Millie Gibson, Michelle Greenidge, Angela Wynter**

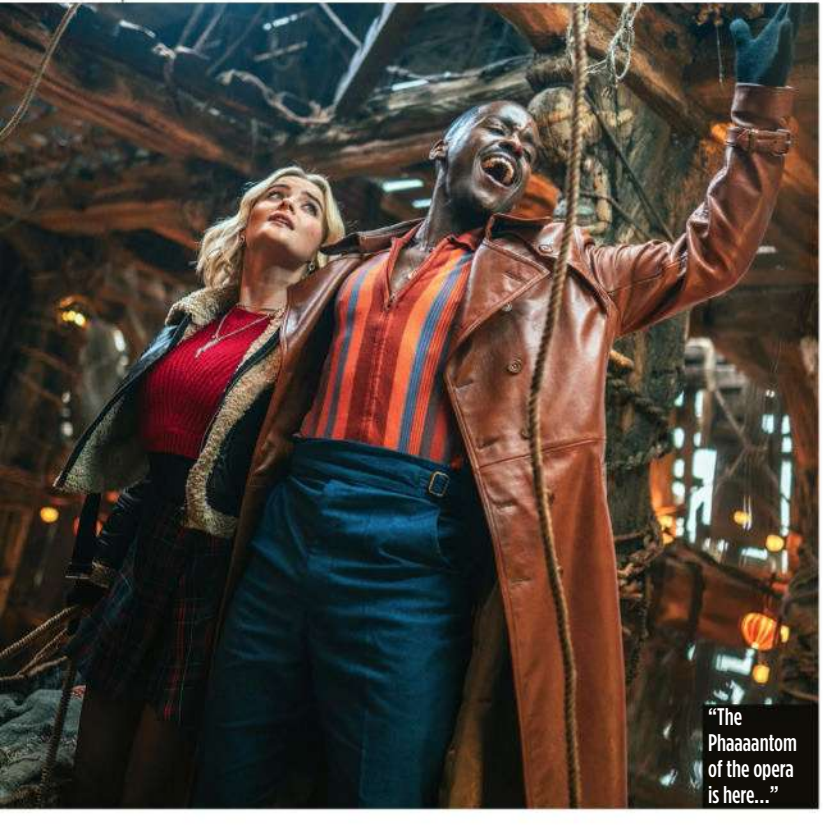
SPECIAL ***Who* in Jim Henson** mode, "The Church On Ruby Road", with its flying sailing ship full of baby-eating goblins, signals (in case "The Giggle" wasn't clear enough) that henceforth we can expect more fantasy in the mix. Bad news for those who prefer spaceships and lasers, but the reasoning is sound: this revival is nearly 19 years old! Exploring new territory is probably very wise.

After three specials jam-packed with incident, this is a rather more simple affair. You can boil the plot down to: goblins kidnap baby, Doctor rescues baby, repeat. The episode rather idles in between those set-pieces, settling in for a solid 12 minutes of chat.

To be fair: horses for courses. Anyone writing a Christmas Day episode would be wise to picture an audience bloated with turkey, distracted by presents. And it also has the task of introducing a new companion to the Doctor, and the audience. (You could equally say that "Rose" was light on plot.)

In this key respect, it certainly works. Millie Gibson is hugely impressive as Ruby Sunday – her face a captivating firework display of emotions. There's surely more to see yet when it comes to Ncuti Gatwa. There's no denying his charisma, which blazes like that arc-light smile, but – to think back to 2005 once again – we've yet to see his equivalent of a "turn of the Earth" speech, or an "I'm going to save Rose Tyler" moment.

Until that day comes, there's plenty here to keep us hooked: the unsolved mystery of Ruby's absent mother; the identity of Mrs Flood, the neighbour who not only knows the word "TARDIS" but smashes the fourth wall as she pronounces it. Maybe in the Mavity Timeline it's possible for people to know they're in a TV show? That can't *just* be a running gag, can it?



"The Phaaaantom of the opera is here..."

> **"There's more to see yet when it comes to Ncuti Gatwa"**

If we've got one petty, nagging doubt, it concerns the Doctor's ever-varying wardrobe. Only a fool would argue that the Doctor can't dress eccentrically, but one who wouldn't be out of place on the catwalk...? That's new: even Jon Pertwee's "dandy" incarnation wasn't really *fashionable*.

It's mildly unsettling for some of us who grew up feeling like the Doctor belonged to the misshapes and misfits – the kids who *didn't* dress well (and also wouldn't feel comfortable throwing shapes in the centre of the dancefloor). But such misgivings may be something this 50-year-old needs to work through in therapy... **Ian Berriman**

i One of the actors playing the goblins, Rachelle Beinart, also played Po in the 2015 reboot of *Teletubbies*.

FOR ALL MANKIND

Season Four

★★★½☆

- UK/US **Apple TV+, streaming now**
- Showrunners **Matt Wolpert, Ben Nedivi**
- Cast **Joel Kinnaman, Wrenn Schmidt, Krys Marshall**

EPISODES 4.01-4.10 **This might** feel like an unlikely criticism coming from *SFX*, but the more sci-fi this alternative history of the space race becomes, the less good it gets. With the series now set in a futuristic 2003, *For All Mankind* has lost much of the pioneering *Right Stuff* spirit of its brilliant early years, and morphed into a smaller, less exciting version of *The Expanse*.

In the show's parallel timeline, interplanetary travel has become so easy that Mars is home to a thriving community of astronauts, cosmonauts and private contractors. In fact, the Red Planet threatens to become the bright centre of the Solar System when an asteroid packed with precious minerals is discovered in its vicinity – if only the US, the (still active) Soviet Union and their corporate partners could agree on the best way to bring the lucrative rock back to Earth...

Even when it isn't firing on all thrusters, *For All Mankind* remains smart, perceptive and (at times) spectacular drama, with an ingenious take on 21st century history, and a truly out-of-this-world soundtrack. But with less compelling mission objectives this time and some of the original characters (most notably Joel Kinnaman's space veteran Ed Baldwin) starting to feel surplus to requirements, the season is too dependent on the show's past glories. **Richard Edwards**

CAROL & THE END OF THE WORLD

Comfortably Numb

★★★★☆

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**
Showrunner **Dan Guterman**
Cast **Martha Kelly, Beth Grant, Lawrence Pressman, Kimberly Hébert Gregory**

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **While most of** humanity is facing the impending destruction of Earth in a hedonistic bucket list frenzy (with much nudity), inveterate glumster Carol finds meaning in routine, working out the apocalypse in an office full of like-minded seekers of order. She doesn't even know what the company's called, or what it does. To its workers it's just "The Distraction".

Welcome to possibly the most depressing work of animation ever (and yes, we're including *When The Wind Blows* in that assessment). Sure, *Carol & The End Of The World*'s 10 episodes have moments of exquisite black humour, plenty of wonderfully bizarre images and a generous smattering of amusing and bittersweet observations on human interaction, but the underlying existential gloom seeps into every scene, constantly making you wonder, "Why do we bother?"

Even the hedonists are simply in a state of massive self-denial,

> **"There are some very bleak ruminations"**

and there are some very bleak ruminations on how few of us ever actually listen to each other. Created by Dan Guterman, who's previously written for cult faves *Community* and *Rick And Morty*, it's a full-on arthouse animated experience, often easier to admire than it is enjoy, which uses the form to craft new ways of telling a story visually – think early Darren Aronofsky meets *Family Guy*.

But there's enough charm and humour in the characters to prevent it being just an clever academic exercise, and a few leftfield detours along the way to stop it looking like merely a desperate attempt to bag an Emmy Award.

Dave Golder

i Carol's friend Donna's car has the licence plate number CL-2NE1 – a nod to Korean rapper CL, formerly of girl group 2NE1.

WHAT IF...? Season Two

Sliding Bores

★★★☆☆

UK/US **Disney+, streaming now**
Head writer **AC Bradley**
Cast **Jeffrey Wright, Hayley Atwell, Benedict Cumberbatch, Samuel L Jackson**

EPISODES 2.01-2.09 **The episode of** this show we'd really like to see is "What If... The Wheels Hadn't Fallen Off The MCU?" Instead, this second season of Marvel's alternate reality anthology show is a reflection of the current state of the franchise: flashes of brilliance and stunning visuals, but overall looking tired, formulaic and increasingly lacking in focus.

In season one the What If...? scenarios were big, bold and attention-grabbing: Peggy Carter becoming the First Avenger; T'Challa becoming Star-Lord; Ultron winning. Single divergent choices or events that span off into new realities. With season two, though, it feels more like we're increasingly looking at alternate reality free-for-alls where anything goes: Avengers in 1602; an alternate timeline in which European colonisation of the Americas never occurred; Doctor Strange Supreme's reality-bridging Sanctum Infinitum.

Even in more traditional episodes, such as "What If... Iron Man Crashed into the Grandmaster?" the What Ifs feel oddly esoteric, and hardly the big questions fans might debate online. The series is also becoming increasingly serialised with Peggy Carter taking centre stage (and even talking to the Watcher, who narrates the series at some points), and more reliant on revisiting its own internal mythology.

All of which should be fun, but actually distracts from the series' simple, enticing conceit. On the plus side, it still looks absolutely gorgeous, with some of the most exciting animation you'll see made for TV. The characters – many voiced by the original actors from the films – feel authentic, and there are plenty of really witty and clever ideas.

The standout episode, "What If... Kahhori Reshaped the World?", centres on an all-new native American character, bravely uses the Mohawk language throughout (with subtitles, of course); the result is rather like the MCU's version of *Prey*.

But like the MCU overall, it simply doesn't feel as good as it used to.

Dave Golder

i An episode about Red Guardian was planned for the second season, but then held over for season three.

"Go on, pull my finger. It's a right laugh."

INSIDE THE MIND OF COFFIN JOE

Top hat and overgrown nails

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

1964-2008 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **José Mojica Marins**

Cast **Various lumpy Brazilians**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Brazilian director** José Mojica Marins is a saint of psychotronic cinema, but his output is more known of than it is seen. This eye-opening set of immaculate 4K transfers should help to change that.

His most famous creation was Zé do Caixão, aka Coffin Joe: an undertaker who features in five of these 10 films. An iconic figure, with his stovepipe hat, cloak and talon-like fingernails, he considers himself a Nietszchean superman, and spurns morality, happy to drown his best friend in the bath (*At Midnight I'll Take Your Soul*), or pour acid on a woman's face (*This Night I'll Possess Your Corpse*). He's a monster – but one whose anti-authoritarianism and total liberation hold some appeal.

Marins's films share many common attributes. Expect orgiastic abandon and bellicose rants, with our anti-hero mocking faith and denying God. Women fare badly: beaten, tortured and molested. Sets can be crude, tombs made from flats with painted stone patterns. Non-diegetic sound effects blare out: screams, wind, tolling bells; the soundtracks can be so cacophonous that closing your eyes is no escape. Other hallmarks include luridly coloured lighting, tarantulas, whips, suicide and voyeurism – all the good stuff.

Above all, Marins loves to poke his fingers into taboos; even when he's not graphic, he's conceptually transgressive. Across its three tales, anthology *The Strange World Of Coffin Joe* indulges in rape, necrophilia and cannibalism. *The Awakening Of The Beast* – a string of set-pieces of deviance – peaks with a hippy gangbang going south as a guy dressed like Jesus does unspeakable things with a staff.

The four films mentioned above are unmissable, the rest are less essential. More of a black comedy, *The End Of Man* casts Marins as a mystery man whose gnomic statements see him treated as a prophet. Sequel *When The Gods Fall Asleep* comes as close as Marins gets to a realist portrait of Brazil, with its gritty footage of locations like a São Paulo favela.

Hellish Flesh concerns the aftermath of a woman throwing acid on her husband's face, while *The Strange Hostel Of Naked Pleasures* visits a limbo-like inn; both feel like hugely overextended anthology show episodes. *Hallucinations Of A Deranged Mind* is essentially a Greatest Hits package repurposing old clips, while 2008's *Embodiment Of Evil* is to *At Midnight* what *Mother Of Tears* is to *Suspiria* – one for completists only.

After watching all 10, you may emerge pale-faced and shaken. A character in *Strange World* sums it up: "Only a really sick mind could conceive such monstrosity!"

Extras Alongside a couple of general appreciations (24 minutes), there are six short video essays and talking heads (138 minutes) which discuss Marins in relation to various figures or phenomena: de Sade, TV horror hosts, Brazil's Marginal Cinema movement, etc. Some, like a piece which compares Marins to surrealists like Luis Buñuel, are cogently argued; others, like a "neurodivergent perspective", stray off the point or fail to make much of a case.

A piece on the "surprisingly complex" sexual politics of his films becomes simply a stream of synopsis, while a discussion of Nietszche prompts a chuckle by using the phrase "elitist bourgeois film culture". Oh, the irony. Thank god for Stephen Thrower; at 87 minutes, his talking head is overlong, but he steadfastly resists pathologising Marins, or suggesting that the connections he sees are anything but guesswork.

After all this highfalutin' analysis, it's a relief to hear from the man himself. In 2001 doc *Damned: The Strange World Of José Mojica Marins* (65 minutes), he comes across as articulate and likeable... until talk turns to shooting a porno where a woman had sex with a German Shepherd. Try writing a video essay on the complex gender politics of *that*.

The late director also features in six commentaries. Plus: a 1948 short and excerpts from two other early films; footage of a trip to Sundance; a comedy short about Coffin Joe going on a date... we could go on and on. The set also comes with a 92-page book, a poster and 12 art cards. **Ian Berriman**

i To finish *At Midnight I'll Take Your Soul*, Marins took 20 diet pills (amphetamines), staying awake for 96 hours straight.

HORRORS OF THE BLACK MUSEUM

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1959 | 12 | Blu-ray

Director **Arthur Crabtree**

Cast **Michael Gough, June Cunningham, Graham Curnow**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **It'd surely be a** hoot to read the '50s censor's report on this; one can imagine the air of supercilious revulsion.

The opening sets the tone. A woman receives a parcel: a pair of binoculars. When she puts them to her eyes, metal spikes spring out. A memorably cruel device, worthy of a *Saw* film. The man responsible is a crime writer who gets his kicks besting the police, devising murders inspired by Scotland Yard's collection of mementos. Michael Gough's performance is entertainingly oversized.

With its prurient interest in London's seedy underbelly and aberrant psychology, the film anticipates *Peeping Tom*. Both also feature Shirley Ann Field, whose performance here is so mesmerisingly wooden that it renders her role in the latter, as an actress who struggles to emote, richly ironic.

Michael Powell's film has intellectual value, though; *Black Museum* is Grand Guignol in CinemaScope – a string of lurid set-pieces which pander to the viewer's most sadistic impulses.

Extras Kim Newman cogently maps influences in a talking head (22 minutes), and is paired with writer Stephen Jones on a commentary. In a prologue added for US release (11 minutes), a hypnotist tries to convince us the film is laced with suggestion. Plus: trailer; gallery. The Blu-ray comes with four art cards. **Ian Berriman**

"See this? Nought to sixty in three minutes, pal."

THE KITCHEN

Coming to the boil

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 15 | SVOD

Directors **Daniel Kaluuya, Kibwe Tavares**

Cast **Kane Robinson, Jedaiah Bannerman, Hope Ikpoku Jr, Ian Wright**

NETFLIX **In a dystopian near-**future where all of London's social housing has been outlawed, it is not, at first, clear why *The Kitchen*'s titular estate is worth fighting for.

Protagonist Izi (a flawless Kane Robinson) describes his home as a "shithole". There are long queues for the showers, the power rarely works, and the residents are subjected to brutal attacks by the police. But over the course of the film (which glimpses at the sinister, sterile nightmare that the rest of the city has been gentrified into) it becomes clear that the Kitchen is worth protecting at all costs, representing the last flickers of authentic humanity in a sprawling urban nightmare.

Izi is determined to leave, saving up every penny he can for a deposit in a new government-approved development, but he begins to see the value of community when he meets young Benji, who's recently lost his mother and believes Izi might be his father. Izi allows Benji to temporarily stay with him in the Kitchen before the move, despite the frequent state-sanctioned violence, and the two open themselves up to the community and its spiritual leader Lord Kitchener (an utterly fabulous acting debut from Ian Wright).

> **"Equal parts moving and thrilling"**

The Kitchen is equal parts moving and thrilling, with kinetic heist scenes, tender teen romance and intelligent sci-fi. Everything from the brutalist architecture to the jewel-toned roller-disco nights feels authentic, and is gorgeously realised by two directors with an eye for detail. This future London may seem doomed, but our present-day one is producing some serious talent. **Leila Latif**

i The name of Ian Wright's character is a nod to the calypso singer, who came to London in 1948 on the Empire Windrush.

LORD OF MISRULE

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2023 | 15 | Download

Director **William Brent Bell**

Cast **Tuppence Middleton, Ralph Ineson, Matt Stokoe**

The classic tropes of folk horror are so familiar by now, so well-grooved, that this most disquieting of genres is in danger of feeling *cosy*.

New British chiller *Lord Of Misrule* dutifully ticks the boxes: a rural idyll that conceals a bloody past; a missing child and a murderous conspiracy of village folk; undying pagan rituals that lurk at the edges of the modern day.

Yes, all the faithful trimmings are here. Poppets. Antlers. Carved masks. There's even a local boozer that falls deathly quiet when somebody enters – though in this case it's not a stranger but the vicar, Rebecca Holland (Tuppence Middleton). Her daughter Grace has been abducted during harvest festival, seemingly a sacrifice to "He [who] stands in the fields and waits", an ancient figure pledged to drive out blight from the land.

Despite echoes of everything from *The Wicker Man* to *The Burning Girls*, *Lord Of Misrule* ultimately manages to rise above its patchwork of eerie clichés. There's not quite enough plot but the low-level hum of dread is immaculately maintained, boosted by impressive art design and punctured by moments of genuine transgression (one particular death is truly horrible). An authentically mystical climax pushes it to a new and even more unnerving place entirely. **Nick Setchfield**

"I'm still not seeing that ice cream here, *mom.*"

BIRTH/REBIRTH

Post-partum obsession

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2023 | 15 | Download

Director **Laura Moss**

Cast **Marin Ireland, Judy Reyes, Breeda Wool, AJ Lister**

***Frankenstein* has captured the** cultural imagination for over 200 years, and in *Birth/Rebirth* is viewed through the cruel prism of grieving motherhood.

Our unorthodox scientist comes in the form of socially awkward mortician Rose (Marin Ireland). Labour nurse Celie (Judy Reyes) has just lost her young daughter Lila (AJ Lister) to meningitis, but discovers that she's been resurrected in Rose's apartment.

Despite her reservations, Celie cannot resist doing whatever she can to save Lila, and moves in with Rose to aid the "experiment". The film eschews the well-worn tradition of the previously dead coming back as monsters, and instead focuses on the increasingly unhinged dynamic between the two women and their desperation to keep Lila alive.

Director Laura Moss has a knack for body horror, making even what are technically standard medical procedures the stuff of nightmares, and picking out the dark humour in an absurd odd couple who have to cohabitate in a claustrophobic apartment in the most extreme of circumstances.

With its salient commentary on the agony of womanhood, nauseatingly tense atmosphere and existential dread, you can't help but think Mary Shelley would approve.

Leila Latif

ℹ Laura Moss has medical experience – they became an EMT after being evacuated from Ground Zero on 9/11.

ATTACK OF THE 50 FT WOMAN

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1958 | PG | Blu-ray

BLU-RAY DEBUT **A '50s B-movie** deserving of *MST3K* mockery. Super-sized by a giant in a glowing sphere, a wife enacts stompy vengeance on her two-timing hubby. Questions abound. Why does she also get a glamorous make-over? Why does her doctor buy chains, not inform the authorities? Risible execution – huge papier mâché mitt; optical effects which lend figures a ghostly transparency – supplies further chuckles.

Extras Critical commentary; trailer. **Ian Berriman**

DESTROY ALL NEIGHBORS

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | TBC | SVOD

SHUDDER **Gleeful excess is** the MO of this cartoonish horror-comedy, which sees prog-loving nebbish Will suffering snowballing misfortune. Accidentally killing his troll-like neighbour Vlad (*Bill & Ted*'s Alex Winter, buried beneath warty prosthetics) is only the start...

Designed to make you wince-laugh, it's a luridly colourful affair that finds some effective ways of bashing the funny bone, while maintaining a genial feel. **Ian Berriman**

PUNCH

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 18 | Download

This British slasher makes strong use of its combined Clacton, Hastings and Brighton locations to capture a feeling of seedy seaside decrepitude.

Alina Allison is Frankie, a young woman torn between looking after her troubled mother and the desire to escape to university – but that's the least of her troubles when a killer in a Punch mask (which often renders his quipping unintelligible) starts offing the local youth. Nasty, brutish and short, *Punch* is rather effective, and peppered with a dash of folk horror. **Will Salmon**

THE CIVIL DEAD

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2023 | TBC | VOD

Oozing slacker charm, this micro-budget indie comedy finds aspiring photographer Clay reuniting with old pal Whit, who takes the LA deadbeat schtick a touch too far by actually being dead. "You're the only guy who can see me," Whit's ghost tells Clay, setting up what's essentially *Randall And Hopkirk (Deceased), Dude*.

It's a wryly amusing watch with a dry, self-effacing vibe that gives way to something darker, making the afterlife a potent metaphor for a generation's existential crisis. **Nick Setchfield**

EVERETT COLLECTION INC / ALAMY

ALLIGATOR/ALLIGATOR II

A large scaled problem

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 29 JANUARY

1980/1991 | 15 | 4K & Blu-ray

Directors **Lewis Teague, Jon Hess**

Cast **Robert Forster, Robin Riker, Joseph Bologna, Dee Wallace**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Of all the films** swimming along in *Jaws*' wake, *Alligator* is the best – a genuinely brilliant film in its own right. That's what happens when you have John Sayles (later an acclaimed independent director, but at this point a gun-for-hire screenwriter) on board.

Riffing on an urban myth, the set-up sees a gator living in the LA sewer system growing to 30 feet in length after munching on experimental dogs dumped by a pharma company. Realised using baby gators in model sets and a suit operated pantomime-horse style, the beast is *good enough*, with director Lewis Teague having the sense to never show too much.

Often tense, with some neat visuals – like a killing illuminated by camera flashes – it's ruthless too, with even a small boy getting munched. But it's Sayles's wry wit which really elevates the film. There are countless idiosyncratic touches: the way people keep mentioning the receding hairline of Robert Forster's cop hero; the souvenir sellers flogging soft toys; the sewer wall graffiti reading "Harry Lime Lives!".

Despite being made 11 years later, sequel *Alligator II: The Mutation* skews closer to *Jaws*, centring on a property developer who – much like Amity Island's Mayor – refuses to nix a lakeside carnival. There's a Quint knock-off too: a plaid-clad hunter who calls everyone "Bubba", played by B-movie stalwart Richard Lynch.

Joseph Bologna's detective is a pretty mild brand of maverick – his trademark rebellion illegal parking. And we could have done without the wrestling scenes (inserted due to the original's popularity with Hispanic cinemagoers), or the recycled shots from the original. But the film's biggest flaw is that the camera lingers too long on its unconvincingly immobile monster.

Extras Bonuses are carried over from Shout Factory's US releases of 2022. The first film comes on both 4K and Blu-ray. You also get a longer TV cut, which snips swears and gore but adds new scenes – like a two-minute sequence where a mother thinks that her toddler's

> **There are countless idiosyncratic touches**

been snatched. You can view these additional scenes separately too – though, oddly, they're presented out of sequence, in blurry 4:3 ratio.

There are five interviews (totalling 76 minutes). Teague is good value, but the highlight is an appearance by one Bryan Cranston, a lowly effects assistant on the film, who recounts tales of cooking up faux alligator innards and chatting with Forster by way of tribute to the late actor. We also hear from Sayles, female lead Robin Riker and a make-up effects chap. *The Mutation* (on Blu-ray only) also comes with five interviews (director, second AD, editor, effects coordinator and actor Kane Hodder, totalling 44 minutes) – more than this lacklustre affair really deserves. Plus: trailers; TV spots. **Ian Berriman**

"I'll fetch some gator aid!" "Oh, YOU. Ow."

PICTORIAL PRESS LTD / ALAMY

i According to the editor, a bulge in Richard Lynch's trousers had to be "fixed" via CG before *Alligator II* made its TV debut.

MAD CATS

★★★½☆

RELEASED 29 JANUARY

2023 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Reiki Tsuno**

Cast **Shô Mineo, Yûya Matsuura, Ayane, Michael Aaron Stone**

Reiki Tsuno strove to make his directorial debut a film with "no nationality", shooting in locations such as a French-style rose garden and a stately home transported brick by brick from the UK. Its eccentricity, however, is *very* Japanese.

The plot (such as it is) sees a cowardly slacker pairing with a homeless man to rescue his archaeologist brother from the clutches of some "cat monsters". These slinky females are given names like "Silent Knife" and "Insane Nunchaku" in the credits, but no dialogue – well, it'd only distract from all their leather-clad posing with Uzis.

What exactly these sullen hotties are (cats somehow transformed into humans?) is one of several details that remain hazy. "I don't know what's going on," the homeless guy says, and you'll empathise. Still, there's plenty of appealingly deadpan humour here, from the cat monster who endlessly flails her sword about without ever actually attacking, to the knowingly fake backdrops in the driving scenes.

Extras The director seems likeably self-deprecating in an interview (28 minutes), talking of feeling "out of his depth" and masking mistakes with CG. His commentary's candid too, even addressing the problems of having a poo on location. Plus: fight rehearsal/on-screen comparisons (five minutes); behind-the-scenes shots (nine minutes); trailer. **Ian Berriman**

INSIDE

Womb Raider

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

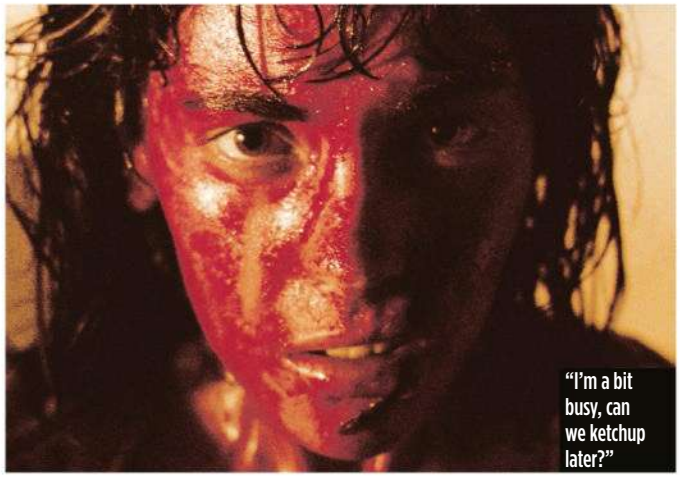
RELEASED 5 FEBRUARY
2007 | 18 | Blu-ray
Directors **Alexandre Bustillo, Julien Maury**
Cast **Alysson Paradis, Béatrice Dalle, Nicolas Duvauchelle**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Second Sight's** second New French Extremity revival this year is a home-invasion thriller with a taboo twist: violence to a pregnant woman. The title refers to both the intrusion visited upon the widowed Sarah, and the attacker's objective – her unborn child.

Set mostly in one gloomily lit house, it begins in slow-burn fashion, and initially feels pretty formulaic. However, the fact that the villain is female – Béatrice Dalle's nameless, babygrow-sniffing Woman – shakes things up. Despite a significant body count, it's the violence meted out to Sarah which really hits home. It's a grimly visceral experience, with household objects (like the Woman's gleaming scissors) deployed in ways that inspire appalled gasps.

Featuring an agitating score, and an effective reveal of the Woman's identity, *Inside* only really wobbles when completely setting realism aside in one scene – and with some crude CG sequences of a baby in utero, which haven't aged well. While not on a par with, say, *Martyrs*, this is a horror it's hard to imagine returning to repeatedly; the kind you survive, rather than savour. **Extras** Two separate critical commentaries both feature a few astute observations and as many longueurs. A video essay (15 minutes) which compares Sarah to the Virgin Mary may have you muttering "I wouldn't bother" at every occurrence of the phrase, "One could argue...".

There are five interviews (totalling 102 minutes): directors Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury; star Alysson Paradis (Vanessa's sister!); producer Franck Ribière, DoP Laurent Barès, and the stunt coordinator. The producer is long-winded, and Barès's accent a bit of a barrier, but these are all worthwhile. Among other things, we learn of an earlier draft involving a placenta-eating *male* serial killer; Dalle's habit of crying, "Give me more blood!"; and the use of a platform to eerily "float" her about in one shot. The Limited Edition set adds a 70-page book and six art cards. **Ian Berriman**



ALBUM / ALAMY

Emmanuelle star Sylvia Kristel was the directors' first choice to play the Woman, but she turned the script down.

ANDY WARHOL PRESENTS...

Looks a scream

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1973/1974 | 18 | Blu-ray
Director **Paul Morrissey**
Cast **Udo Kier, Joe Dallesandro, Arno Juerging, Monique van Vooren**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **These perverse** riffs on gothic were marketed using Andy Warhol's name, but are very much Paul Morrissey films. Shot back to back in Italy, both have an improvised feel, with the director reportedly devising scenes on his morning drive.

In **Flesh For Frankenstein** ★★★½☆ Udo Kier's Baron plans to create a race that will obey him, building both male and female creatures; meanwhile, his wife is entertained by Joe Dallesandro's studly farmhand. It was shot in 3D: cue guts (and Joe's arse) being thrust in the viewer's face. Provocation is a major part of the film's appeal; in one scene the Baron sexually satisfies himself using an abdominal cavity. You can't picture Peter Cushing trying that, can you?

In **Blood For Dracula** ★★★☆☆, the Count (Kier again) visits Italy to find a virgin "bride", and is taken in by an aristocratic family. It's a morbidly humorous take on the vampire – a feeble, fussy figure, at one point reduced to licking vaginal blood from the floor. There's little plot – the Count just hits on one daughter after another, none as pure as they claim... Viewers must also negotiate an array of accents: not just Dallesandro's Brooklyn and Kier's German, but Italian and French. Still, the main location, a 17th century villa, is a stunning backdrop, and the gloomy, romantic score is quite beautiful. **Extras** Bonuses stem from the US Severin and Vinegar Syndrome releases of 2021 (oddly, anything with Morrissey is AWOL). Both have analysis by writer Stephen Thrower and interviews with the art director and AD; the latter reveals that they nicknamed Dallesandro "Big Dick"! **Flesh** ★★★★☆ adds commentary by a trio of podcasters, and four more interviews. **Blood** ★★★½☆ likewise adds another four; the composer playing his theme on the piano is a highlight. **Ian Berriman**

Composer Claudio Gizzi recalls Warhol being present at production meetings, but can't remember him ever saying a word.

NOW ON DIGITAL FORMATS *Foe • The Hunger Games: The Ballad Of Songbirds & Snakes • Thanksgiving*

THE POD GENERATION

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2023 | 12 | Download
Director **Sophie Barthes**
Cast **Emilia Clarke, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Rosalie Craig,**

Nobody seemed to see the iPhone coming, and we're still waiting for flying cars, but even taking into account the ways that technology often zigs when we think it'll zag, *The Pod Generation* has a profoundly unconvincing vision of what lies ahead.

Emilia Clarke and Chiwetel Ejiofor play happily married couple Rachel and Alvy. She's an ambitious executive, while he's a tree-hugging botanist, content to support his wife's climb up the corporate ladder.

Where they disagree is on the matter of Rachel's desire to use a "pod" to grow their much-desired offspring, so she secretly hires an artificial womb owned by a sinister tech firm called Pegasus. This is put down to vaguely feminist reasons around not being held back by the physical toil of pregnancy. Although, as most people who have children will tell you, that's not the most taxing part of parenthood.

The film isn't funny, twisted or exciting enough to paper over a weak central premise, and at nearly two hours long, the flimsiness of the conceit is fully exposed. Even Clarke seems puzzled when explaining Rachel's motivations, and why spending a fortune and testing her relationship to grow a baby in a large plastic egg is empowering for her character – or, indeed, interesting for an audience. **Leila Latif**

DEVIL GIRL FROM MARS

A Nyah calling

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1954 | PG | Blu-ray
Director **David MacDonald**
Cast **Patricia Laffan, Hugh McDermott, Hazel Court**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **A remote Scottish** inn is the unlikely site for first contact in this low-budget British B-movie, which takes a pulpy sci-fi scenario, mashes it up with melodrama, and stirs in some put-the-kettle-on stoicism.

A great deal about it feels familiar, particularly when it comes to the subplots. One concerns an escaped prisoner who we're given no particular reason to believe is *not* responsible for murdering his wife; the other, an implausibly speedy romance between a journalist and a model.

Main reason to watch: the titular Nyah (pronounced Nigh-a), knocked off-course on a mission to find virile examples of British masculinity. Those expecting red skin or horns will be disappointed, but Patricia Laffan's space dominatrix certainly cuts an imposing figure striding through the French windows in her shiny black PVC miniskirt and cloak. Forever sneering at we Earthlings' "primitive savagery", there's something Servalan-ian about her superior sangfroid. Her robot – a sort of walking fridge-freezer with arms apparently made from plant pots – is equally delightful.

The spaceship model isn't the best, and the conclusion is terribly pat, but the whole affair has an undeniably campy appeal. Who can resist a film where the stock Professor type goes looking for an invisible forcefield, but doesn't think of waving a stick about?

Extras Kim Newman (18 minutes) is amusingly wry about the film's limitations in a talking head. He's paired with fellow film writer Barry Forshaw on a conversational commentary. Plus: gallery. The Blu-ray also comes with four art cards. **Ian Berriman**

i Afterwards, Laffan had to have her phone number changed due to men ringing up asking, "Is that the Devil Girl from Mars?"

ROUND UP

The biggest movie hitting disc this month is Gareth Edwards's **THE CREATOR** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, out now) – also, take note, now on Disney+. Set during a war between the Western world and AI, it sees John David Washington's character tasked with tracking down a weapon... which turns out to be an AI child. We said: "At times it feels more like a remix than something truly fresh" – but also "the visuals are the very definition of sumptuous." Bonuses: one 55-minute Making Of. In horror-comedy **THE BLACKENING** (Blu-ray/DVD, 29 January), a masked killer forces a group of friends to play a boardgame that involves answering questions about black culture. We said: "A nuanced and highly intelligent satire of the African-American experience." A decent spread of extras includes commentary, a featurette on the writing process, a Q&A, a spoof game show and more. A pizzeria's animatronic mascots come alive at night in videogame adaptation **FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY'S** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, 29 January) – which is bad news for Josh Hutcherson's security guard. We said: "A fun, kid-friendly hack-and-slash horror that warms the heart more than it delivers the scares." Bonuses: short featurettes on adapting the game, the animatronics and the sets. Finally, the latest TV box set is **THE KINGDOM TRILOGY** (Blu-ray, 5 February). It has restored versions of *The Kingdom I* and *The Kingdom II*, plus *The Kingdom: Exodus*, Lars von Trier's 2022 return to the titular haunted hospital.

DOCTOR WHO

The special stuff

RELEASED OUT NOW!
160/176/224 pages | Paperback/ebook
Authors **Gary Russell, Mark Morris, James Goss**
Publisher **BBC Books**

Remember *Doctor Who*'s 60th anniversary specials? Have yourself checked for concussion if you don't; it wasn't exactly many moons ago. Ebook novelisations for each followed within a week of transmission; now all three are available in paperback, in the classic Target range format.

Safe pair of hands Gary Russell tackles **The Star Beast** ★★★½☆. In the tradition of *Who* writer Malcolm Hulke (his prologue to *The Dinosaur Invasion* springs to mind), he weaves a new character throughout – steelworks cleaner Stew Ferguson. Addressing how giant cracks across London miraculously heal themselves, meanwhile, he comes up with an economical gloss worthy of Target stalwart Terrance Dicks: "What happened next made no sense..."

Documents are scattered throughout, such as an MOD reply to a freedom of information request and a UNIT memo; some of this could be dismissed as padding, but a Shadow Proclamation article on the Wrarth Warriors neatly fleshes out these intergalactic cops (they were, we're told, genetically engineered using parts from five species). We also learn that the TARDIS interior changes fragrance as well as colour, treating travellers to a whiff of mint or eucalyptus oil.

Wild Blue Yonder ★★★½☆ is Mark Morris's first Target novelisation, but hopefully won't be his last. He's the most impressive stylist here, displaying a knack for a vivid simile: a room on the spaceship is "the colour of gloomy forgetfulness", while aged robot Jimbo creaks "like an old castle door". Equally evocative is the moment where he notes that Wilf smells of wool, Extra Strong Mints and army soap. Perfect.

There isn't much in the way of new additions here, though (barring the unlikely revelation that Donna took up yoga), and plot points we'd hoped might be clarified remain a little hazy. For one: why exactly *does* the TARDIS twice blast out "Wild Blue Yonder"? Our assumption: to plant Mrs Bean's funny name in the Doctor's mind, giving him a question which would reveal Donna's humanity. However, the length of the faux-Donna's arms remains the only explanation given for his (eventual) correct identification.

James Goss takes the most creative approach, employing the villainous Toymaker himself as the narrator of **The Giggle** ★★★★☆, using appropriate phrases ("go back two spaces"; "fallen down a long snake"), and scattering games here and there: a maze; a word search that's all maniacal "HA HA HA"s. The book even takes on a *Choose Your Own Adventure* format for a while. Faced with the insurmountable obstacle of licensing lyrics, meanwhile, he wittily has a music copyright lawyer pop up just before the Spice Girls blast out in UNIT HQ.

There's a generous sprinkling of geeky references, and some sensible tidying up around issues such as why crazed world leaders aren't launching nukes (a UNIT override). An early scene where a man randomly stands in front of a car is also improved upon: now

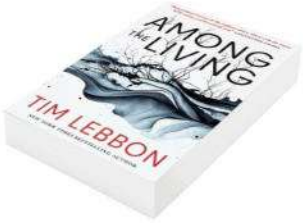
> **"Wilf smells of wool, Extra Strong Mints and army soap"**

he's a non-driver who crashes a car – something easier to execute in prose than on location. Goss also establishes that between the Thirteenth Doctor's regeneration and the Fourteenth's, only 15 hours pass (that's canon now, Big Finish, so no sneaking 300 audio box sets into the gap).

All three are solid adaptations, and marketing-wise it makes perfect sense for them to follow hot on the heels of transmission. It's also nothing new – indeed, the novelisation for 1983's "The Five Doctors" was mistakenly shelved in some bookshops *before* the episode aired. Still, you do come away reminded that – as previous entries in the revived Target range have repeatedly proved – there are some things to be gained by revisiting stories several years later, from a new perspective.

Ian Berriman

i A novelisation of "The Church On Ruby Road" is out on 25 January – but (for now at least) in hardback, not Target format.



AMONG THE LIVING

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
304 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Tim Lebbon**
Publisher **Titan Books**

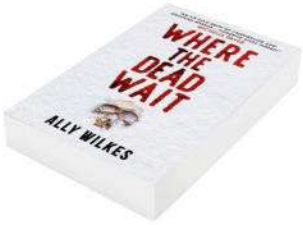
Here's a cheerful thought: as the icecaps continue to melt, so the chances of humanity being exposed to dangerous toxins or even prehistoric viruses increase.

In Tim Lebbon's latest horror-thriller, a group of illegal miners accidentally unleash such a plague when they venture into an ice cave on the remote Hawkshead island. Also caught up in this drama is a group of environmental protestors, including Bethan, who has a history with one of the miners, and Goyo, who's quick to realise exactly how much trouble they are all in.

Among The Living starts at a run and never lets up as the dwindling group fight for survival in the harsh frozen landscape, and against a virus that seems to have a mind of its own. The relentless pace is enough to distract from some underwritten characters.

While Bethan and Dean's relationship is complicated, some of the others feel like action movie archetypes. Goyo's actions, especially, while understandable from a plot point of view, aren't entirely convincing, and you never quite feel the terror these people should be experiencing given the dire circumstances.

Still, if you're after a tight, exciting thriller with ecological themes and a dash of early episodes of *X-Files*, it's appropriately chilly for the winter. **Will Salmon**



WHERE THE DEAD WAIT

★★★★☆

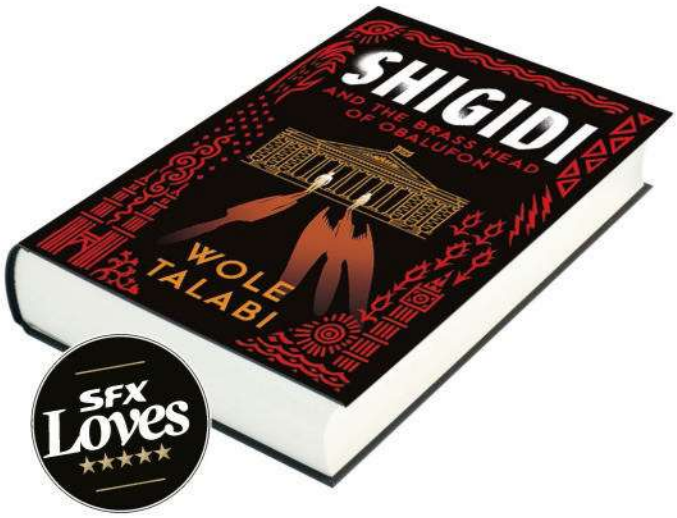
RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
464 pages | **Paperback/ebook**
Author **Ally Wilkes**
Publisher **Titan Books**

Skip this Arctic horror if you ever hope to enjoy a bacon sandwich again. The smell of cooking pork is definitely going to lose its appeal...

After a doomed expedition to the legendary Open Polar Sea forces his men into cannibalism, explorer William Day is reviled by polite society. More than a decade later, his former second-in-command, Jesse Stevens, has gone missing on a similar voyage, so Day is offered a chance at redemption: he just has to bring Stevens home. But inevitably, history begins to repeat itself, and this time Day might not survive it.

This is author Ally Wilkes's second novel after *All The White Spaces*, which was also about historical polar explorers. Her fascination with the brutality of the unforgiving ice is evident in her prose: her ships are haunted houses, hulls groaning with vengeful spirits; and yet vastly preferable to the alternative, the alien landscape where any kind of monster might lurk.

The true horrors of Day's predicament come into focus slowly, as Wilkes hops between the two expeditions, and she lets Day keep some of his secrets for too long, past the point where some readers will have lost patience. Still, there's enough dementedly creative nightmare imagery along the way to ensure that all but the most jaded horror fans will be satisfied. **Sarah Dobbs**



SHIGIDI AND THE BRASS HEAD OF OBALUFON

How to get a head

★★★★★

RELEASED **8 FEBRUARY**
304 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**
Author **Wole Talabi**
Publisher **Gollancz**

At its heart, this fantasy novel is a heist caper. Nneoma is a succubus, and her partner Shigidi is a minor nightmare god employed by the Orisha Spirit Company. The pair branch out as freelancers, accepting a dangerous assignment: retrieving an artefact from the British Museum. Given recent discourse, righteous anger at the museum's possession of plundered treasures feels apt.

The characters' dynamic is terrific, and this is also the story of their relationship, with a well-constructed arc that starts *in medias res*, yanks us back through history, and returns to a satisfying conclusion.

The book joins the canon of literature set in a world behind our own. Fans of Neil Gaiman and Kate Griffin will feel at home, although Wole Talabi reveals his story through the lens of Yoruba tradition, drawing on his Nigerian background. The universe is clearly anchored in African beliefs, but with a global perspective and modern twists, like sigils drawn on smartphones. The gods operate as ruthless corporations, with events such as the Crusades described as

> **"The universe is anchored in African beliefs"**

hostile takeovers. It has the energy of an *Avengers* movie, and its punch-ups are described with a thrilling intensity.

If it appeals, you'll be happy to learn that there's more: though this is Talabi's debut novel, he's published many short stories, including several featuring Shigidi (bit.ly/shigidishort). **Dave Bradley**

i The titular brass head is a real artefact – a 14th or 15th century sculpture, dug up during house-building works in 1938.

RED SIDE STORY

★★★½☆

RELEASED **6 FEBRUARY**
384 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**
Author **Jasper Fforde**
Publisher **Hodder & Stoughton**

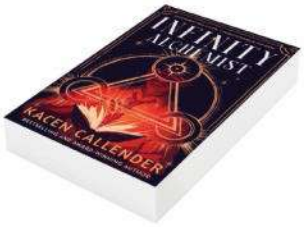
This sequel's been a long time coming, though it doesn't appear to be an afterthought. When *Shades Of Grey* was published in 2009, Jasper Fforde said he had two further books planned. He just seems to have taken his time.

So welcome back to Chromatacia, which is what the UK will become in the far future after some unknown catastrophe. It's a place where people can see only a limited range of the spectrum, and your place in society is determined by which colours you can perceive. "Greys" are the lowly working class; "reds" and "yellows" rule the roost.

It's a cosy middle-England dystopia but a dystopia nonetheless, with corruption rife. Can forbidden lovers, Edward (a red) and Jane (a grey) smash the system? Or is Chromatacia's creator ready to deliver some Old Testament retribution?

Usually you have to just go with the flow of the crazed logic in Fforde's worlds, but here we see him pulling back the curtain (and there are a lot of *The Wizard Of Oz* references) to hint at his workings. The result is more melancholic than his usual work, and the plot less focussed, as the characters default to much existential philosophising.

It's still great fun and full of quirky worldbuilding detail, just maybe one for Fforde's existing fans rather than newcomers. **Dave Golder**



INFINITY ALCHEMIST

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 6 FEBRUARY

400 pages | Paperback/audiobook

Writer **Kacen Callender**

Publisher **Faber & Faber**

Imagine that you're Harry Potter and you get caught by Professor Snape while breaking into his office. He spots that you're talented in magic, and thereby blackmails you into helping him search for a dangerous magical book. And then? You fall in love...

Okay, so that's not *quite* what happens here: for starters, there isn't much of an age difference between our young protagonist, Ash, and the academic, Ramsay. Then there's the fact that Ramsay changes genders at will, so "he" and "she" swap places all the way through the prose. It's to author Kacen Callender's credit that this barely even impacts on the reader after the initial switch; it just happens in this particular world, no big deal.

More importantly, it's admirable that a novel which focuses so much on dialogue over action doesn't become boring. There are a lot of discussions about food or the casting of spells while we wait for the main story to kick into gear, but Ash and Ramsay are good company, so it doesn't really matter.

They eventually wind up working with Ramsay's ex, Callum (spoiler: there are *many* feelings) leading to the book ultimately becoming a three-way romantic character study. This is all good – but the last few chapters, which finally unleash some action, do feel overly rushed. **Meg Wilde**

JONATHAN ABERNATHY YOU ARE KIND

★★★★☆

RELEASED 1 FEBRUARY

368 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Molly McGhee**

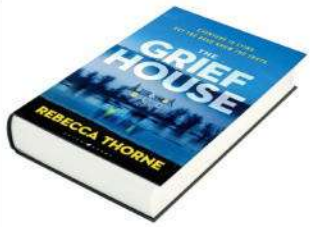
Publisher **Fourth Estate**

As Blur said, modern life is rubbish. Workers' rights are being eroded; our natural environment is increasingly perilous... Living in a capitalist society feels like a waking nightmare.

Molly McGhee's satirical sci-fi explores these ideas, creating a modern-feeling world where the working class are so trapped by their economic circumstances that they're forced to take government jobs that put them into literal nightmares, removing the elements holding dreamers back to make them more productive.

Abernathy is a troubled young man so in debt that he has to work as both a nightmare cleaner and serving junk food in a soulless mall. Sounds depressing, and it is, but the narrator has a wicked sense of humour; think Kurt Vonnegut with JG Ballard's outlook.

The book's style will feel familiar to fans of movies like *Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind* or shows like *Severance*. It's equally current, retro and futuristic, while dialling into dark emotions. Sadness is seeped into every sentence, from the depressing opening to the tragic finale. Basically, it's late-stage capitalism in book form, so don't expect a Disney ending... **Sam Ashurst**



THE GRIEF HOUSE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 18 JANUARY

384 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Rebecca Thorne**

Publisher **Raven Books**

If ever a horror novel was an argument for favouring real therapy from a qualified professional over non-traditional treatments, this is it.

Three years after the death of her mother, Blue is still struggling to come to terms with her loss. Bereavement retreat Hope Marsh House sounds like the ideal place to get some closure: located on a beautiful and remote country estate, it's a technology-free haven for the heartbroken.

Thing is, Blue has a particular psychic gift that means she sees the ghosts of murder victims, so when she starts seeing dead people at the house, it can only mean one thing: someone at the retreat is a killer.

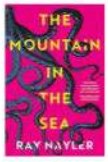
Tense and spooky, Rebecca Thorne's latest is a lot more serious than her previous works. She delves deep into Blue's psychology, plus that of her late mother, and several of the other grieving souls she helps along the way, unpeeling the layers of horror to devastating effect.

So it's a shame that the portrayal of the killer is so utterly lacking in empathy: the book's baddie is straight-up evil, able to justify carrying out horrifying crimes in a way that never really convinces.

On the bright side, despite several explicit Shirley Jackson references, Blue gets a tentatively happy ending – more than any of Jackson's heroines ever had. **Sarah Dobbs**

REISSUES

Our pick of the paperbacks: Ray Nayler's **THE MOUNTAIN IN THE SEA** (★★★★★, out now, W&N), winner of the



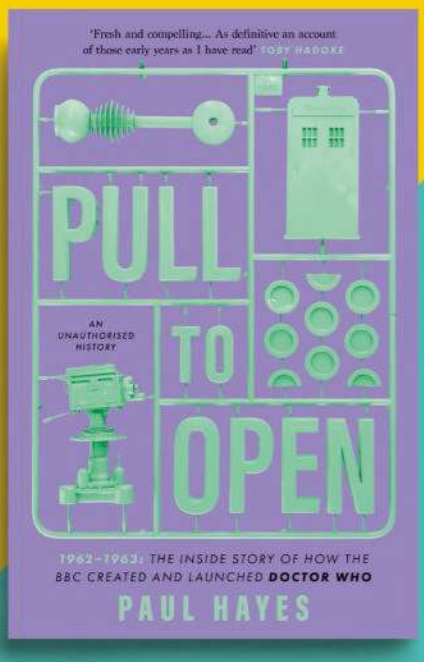
Locus Award for Best First Novel. It follows a marine biologist dispatched to a remote Vietnamese archipelago by a big tech corporation, to investigate a highly intelligent species of octopus which could hold the key to valuable breakthroughs. We said: "For all its ideas about language and non-human intelligence, it reads like a particularly pacy thriller... Smart and often scary, this is a fearsomely entertaining novel." Set in a near-future Britain, Temi Oh's cyberpunk romance **MORE PERFECT** (★★★★☆,

1 February, Simon & Schuster) centres on the relationship between Moremi, a dancer who longs to connect to the Panopticon, a supercharged digital social network where you can see inside other people's minds, and Orpheus, brought up in isolation by a neo-Luddite father who raised him to question everything. We said: "Sometimes flags in its middle section... The final section, though, is a triumph, a bravura mix of action, Greek mythology and discourse on the nature of consciousness." Finally, Nick Harkaway's

hardboiled crime pastiche **TITANIUM NOIR** (★★★★☆, 1 February, Corsair) follows a PI investigating the murder of a Titan, one of this near-future society's genetically-altered, seven-foot-tall superhumans. We said: "Think *Blade Runner* in the style of *Sin City*."

TEN ACRE FILMS

QUALITY NON-FICTION BOOKS EXPLORING **TIME AND SPACE**


'Fresh and compelling... As definitive an account of those early years as I have read' TOBY HADOKE
PULL TO OPEN
AN UNAUTHORISED HISTORY
1962–1963: THE INSIDE STORY OF HOW THE BBC CREATED AND LAUNCHED DOCTOR WHO
PAUL HAYES

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The Long Game: The Inside Story of How the BBC Brought Back Doctor Who

Doctor Who's complex journey from a failed TV movie to its hit modern revival.

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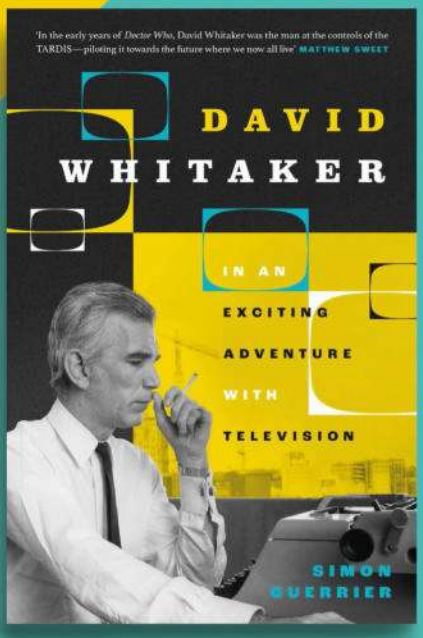
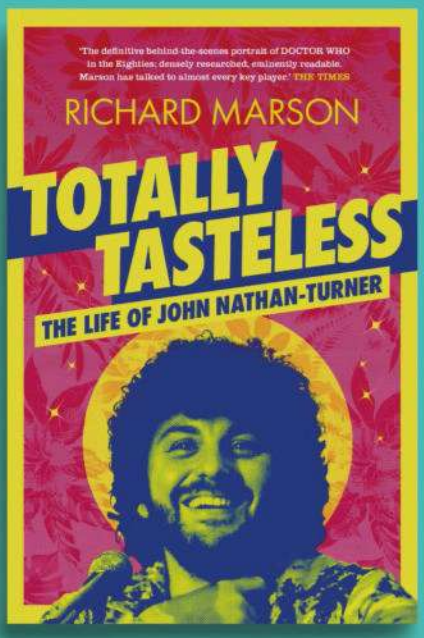

'In the early years of Doctor Who, David Whitaker was the man at the controls of the TARDIS — piloting it towards the future where we now all live' MATTHEW SWEET
DAVID WHITAKER
IN AN EXCITING ADVENTURE WITH TELEVISION
SIMON GUERRIER

NEW David Whitaker in an Exciting Adventure with Television

The surprising life story of *Doctor Who*'s first story editor is uncovered at last.

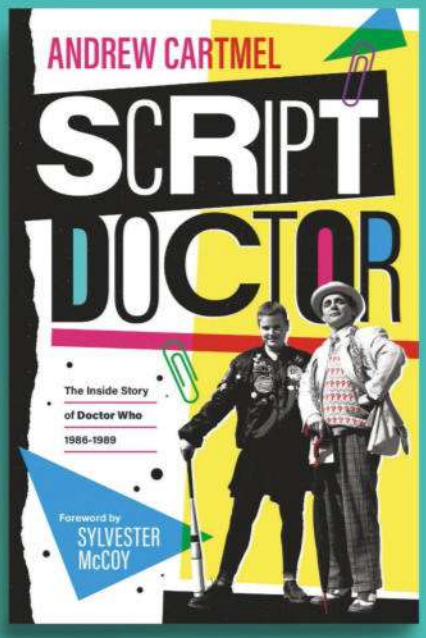
Softcover, £17.99


'The definitive behind-the-scenes portrait of DOCTOR WHO in the Eighties; densely researched, eminently readable. Marson has talked to almost every key player.' THE TIMES
RICHARD MARSON
TOTALLY TASTELESS
THE LIFE OF JOHN NATHAN-TURNER

Totally Tasteless: The Life of John Nathan-Turner

The life and controversies of *Doctor Who*'s longest-serving producer are explored in this moving biography.

Softcover, £17.99

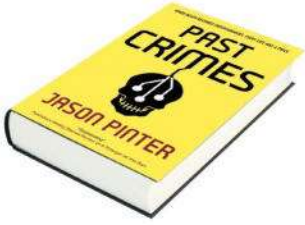


Script Doctor: The Inside Story of Doctor Who

The candid 1980s production diaries of Andrew Cartmel, one of *Doctor Who*'s most influential script editors.

Softcover, £14.99

AVAILABLE NOW FROM **tenacrefilms.bigcartel.com**



PAST CRIMES

★★★½☆

RELEASED 6 FEBRUARY

288 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Jason Pinter**

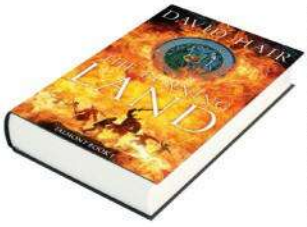
Publisher **Severn House**

The *Ready Player One* parallels are clear in this near-future thriller where the human race spends most of its spare time in a vast VR simulation called Earth+. In place of the wall-to-wall nostalgia of Ernest Cline's hit novel, however, *Past Crimes* taps into another, rather more grisly 21st century obsession: true crime.

Cassie West finds herself at the epicentre of one of the most notorious mass suicides/murders in history when her late husband Harris is pegged as the instigator of the so-called "Blight". A decade later, Cassie realises another attack may be imminent, but nobody wants to listen to the wife of a universally vilified monster – even though Past Crimes, a tech giant specialising in immersive reconstructions of real-life murders, would really like to cash in on her side of the story.

With its pacy plotting, chillingly plausible future and scathing satire on contemporary issues such as the metaverse, aggressive capitalism and the widening gap between rich and poor, most of Jason Pinter's novel makes for a gripping read.

Unfortunately, it goes off the rails in the final act, as the limitations of the mystery become apparent – it's hard to keep you guessing when the cast of characters is so small – and the villain's scheme takes a turn for the downright preposterous. **Richard Edwards**



THE BURNING LAND

★★★★☆

RELEASED 1 FEBRUARY

480 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **David Hair**

Publisher **Jo Fletcher Books**

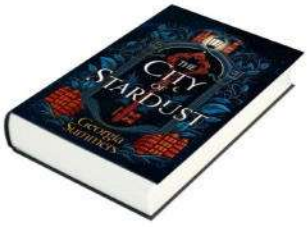
There's much that feels familiar in *The Burning Land*, with its magic, knights and mythical creatures, but author David Hair writes with sufficient vigour to imbue this fantasy adventure with personality and momentum.

Jadyn is a Vestal Knight, sworn to defend the Triple Empire from their enemies, the shapeshifting Vyr. When he breaks the rules to interrogate a captured Vyr, Jadyn starts to question the orthodoxy, forcing him and his companions to flee their former masters.

The protagonists are colourfully drawn and the evolution of the relationships between the members of the party takes some pleasantly unexpected turns. The villains are drawn more broadly, particularly antagonist Yoryn Borghart, an inquisitor charged with rooting out heresy.

Jadyn and his fellow Knights struggle to accept the idea that the Empire might be corrupt, yet they're surrounded by such blatant cruelty and depravity that their devotion to the cause stretches credulity.

Besides that, Hair's worldbuilding is strong, with clear rules and limits for magic, and tangles of hidden history for Jadyn to unravel. His strengths as a writer are most evident in the briskly paced, engaging and pulse-raising battle scenes, and the pervasive sense of tension. **David West**



THE CITY OF STARDUST

★★★½☆

RELEASED 25 JANUARY

340 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Georgia Summers**

Publisher **Hodderscape**

Family curses, fallen angels, magical cities filled with scholars... there are a lot of fairy tale and fantasy tropes in this debut novel, and most of them are done well.

The Everly family is under a curse, forced to hand over the best of each generation to the powerful, unageing Penelope. However, Marianne Everly fled, leaving behind her daughter Violet in an attempt to find a way to break the debt.

She never returned, and now Penelope is almost ready to claim Violet – assisted by the lonely and tormented Aleksander, a young man desperate for validation from his mistress and a place amongst the scholars.

Violet travels the world in her last months to try and find her mother or a solution of her own, meeting celestial beings and chained monsters but never quite uncovering the answers she's looking for.

It's a powerful tale, and you feel Violet's frustration at the unfairness of it all. It's full of the messiness of real life too, with betrayal and abuse and forgiveness and no easy answers. Unfortunately the sense of urgency tails off towards the end, even as Violet's deadline approaches, with a final resolution that's a little too neat while leaving too many unanswered questions. A compelling story that loses its way. **Rhian Drinkwater**

ALSO OUT

In Dean Koontz's latest, **THE BAD WEATHER FRIEND** (1 February, Thomas & Mercer), a chap receives a peculiar inheritance: a crate containing a seven-foot-tall being, whose mission is to take care of things for him – like dealing with his enemies... In Rachel Harrison's dark horror-comedy **BLACK SHEEP** (out now, Titan), a cynical twentysomething who's estranged from her family returns to the religious community she left behind, to attend an old friend's wedding. The twist: that community is a Satanic cult. Shubnum Khan's debut **THE DJINN WAITS A HUNDRED YEARS** (1 February, Magpie) blends gothic tropes with Indian mythology, telling the tale of a South African mansion where a grieving djinn is stirring from its long sleep. The first in a new bi-monthly range of novellas, Gary Russell's **THE TOMORROW PEOPLE: THE FIRST ONE** (Chinbeard Books) sees Homo Superior types John and Stephen investigating a supposedly haunted house, and Carol travelling back in time to witness the breaking out of The First One. The First Who Exactly? You'll have to read it, won't you? Turning to continuing sagas: Sarah J Maas's Crescent City series reaches its third instalment with **HOUSE OF FLAME AND SHADOW** (30 January, Bloomsbury), which finds half-Fae/half-human heroine Bryce stranded in a strange new world. And there's a fourth entry in CK McDonnell's The Stranger Times series, centred on a Manchester weekly paper dedicated to weird goings-on: **RELIGHT MY FIRE** (25 January, Bantam) involves a mysterious case of a bloke who falls from the sky.

THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Grady Hendrix

It is *just possible* that the horror writer is pulling our leg...

What is your daily writing routine like?
If I want to get my bowl of gruel I have to fill the pages I am given by the Editor. This must happen every day or no gruel.

Describe the room in which you typically write.
I write in a six-by-six iron cage. My Editor keeps a tarp over the cage at all times and blindfolds me when I am taken to The Inspiration Room, so I don't know what the rest of this writers' workshop looks like.

Do you have any personal mementos on your desk?
I am not allowed any personal belongings because they interfere with The Writing Process.

Do you find it helpful to listen to music while writing?
Sometimes the Editor will play "Goodbye Horses" by Q Lazzarus but otherwise it is silent, unless one of the other authors has not met their page count. When that happens there is a lot of noise, most of it screaming and begging.

How do you deal with writers' block or the urge to procrastinate?
If you cannot fill your pages you are taken to The Inspiration Room. You don't want to go to The Inspiration Room.

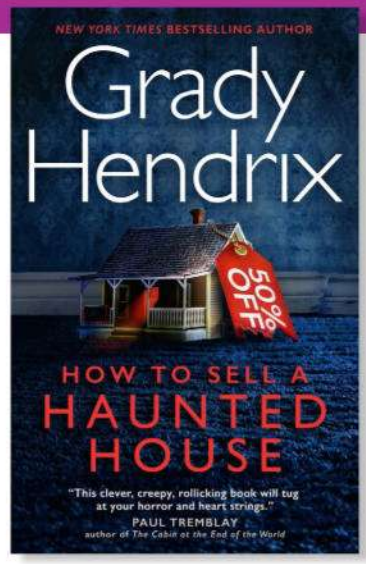
Which of your books are you the most proud of?
After I finished *The Southern Book Club's Guide To Slaying Vampires*, the Editor gave me an extra helping of gruel and let me look at a photograph of trees for 20 minutes. That was nice.

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?
I was taken to The Inspiration Room many times while writing *How To Sell A Haunted House* and I found it difficult to write after having so many parts of my body removed.

Is there anything about one of your books which you wish you could travel back in time and "fix"?
I wish I could travel back in time and not send an application to this writers' workshop. Or at least not include the $50 application fee.

Have you ever come up with a good plot idea in a dream?
Once, I dreamed I was being taken to The Inspiration Room, and I fought my Editor, and I escaped and ran outside but there was nothing there, just an endless black void. That is how I learned that escape is impossible, even in my dreams.

Is there any particular author whose writing ability makes you envious?
No, but I envy the freedom of movement all authors not at this writers' workshop have. I also envy their ability to have all their own fingers and toes. And both kidneys. And tongues.


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
Grady Hendrix
50% OFF
HOW TO SELL A HAUNTED HOUSE
"This clever, creepy, rollicking book will tug at your horror and heart strings."
PAUL TREMBLAY
author of The Cabin at the End of the World

What's the most frustrating thing about being an author?
I wish my Editor would let me see that photo of trees again.

What's the best piece of writing advice you've received or read?
My Editor once told me that if I didn't hit my word count three days in a row he would put me in a woodchipper and use me to fertilise his flower beds. That's always stuck with me and when I sometimes want to quit, I think about it and am inspired to keep going.

How To Sell A Haunted House is available in paperback now, published by Titan Books.

GETTY, ALL NATIONS

GODS

The New Testament

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Publisher **Marvel Comics**

Writer **Jonathan Hickman**

Artist **Valerio Schiti**

ISSUES 1-3 **2019's epic *X-Men*** relaunch was always going to be a hard act to follow for writer Jonathan Hickman, and he currently has two new ongoing comic projects that are also looking to revamp hefty chunks of the Marvel Universe.

The recent reboot of the *Ultimate* line has had intriguing if slightly muddled results so far, but his new title *GODS* is pitched on a different scale, aiming to give Marvel's cosmic world of magic and gods a fresh coat of paint. The first three issues revolve around the difficult relationship between the forces of science and magic, represented by The-Powers-That-Be (magic) and The-Natural-Order-of-Things (science).

The uneasy truce between them has already ended up wrecking the marriage of Powers-That-Be avatar Wynn and his ex-wife turned Natural-Order-Of-Things "Centum" Aiko Mako, but when renegade mage Cubisk Core tries to unleash a dark Elder God, the resulting universe-wide consequences will strain the truce to breaking point.

It's only natural to expect big ideas from a Jonathan Hickman comic, and *GODS* is no let-down in this department, throwing in lurid, attention-grabbing concepts and epic set-pieces. While there are some familiar Marvel universe elements, there's also *lots* of new worldbuilding on display, helped by the intricate visuals and design work from artist Valeria Schiti.

However, it does sometimes feel like Hickman's ambition is getting the better of him here. The closest comparison to the super-smart, plot-heavy tone of *GODS* is Kieron Gillen's recent run on *Eternals*, but that did a much better job of anchoring its complex weirdness to a strong thematic and emotional narrative hook.

The relationship between Wynn and Aiko is interestingly portrayed, but isn't enough to support the sprawling tale Hickman is going for. There are

> "Throws in lurid, attention-grabbing concepts"

definite highlights – most notably, an extended sequence in the oversized first issue where Wynn saves the day via an escalating series of favours – and yet by the end of issue three the series still hasn't found its feet and become a must-read.

Another part of the problem is that while Hickman is a brilliant writer, his habit of having incredibly smart characters being incredibly smart at each other can be a little grating if not supported by rock-solid storytelling. *GODS* is genuinely intriguing and well-crafted so far, but the forthcoming issues need to up their game if this series is going to be as momentous as Marvel clearly wants it to be. **Saxon Bullock**

i Jonathan Hickman's main comic-book influences were sci-fi/fantasy epic *Saga* and Neil Gaiman's classic *The Sandman*.

SMASH!

SFX Loves

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Publisher **Rebellion**

Writer **Paul Grist**

Artists **Tom Foster, Anna Morozova, Jimmy Broxton, VV Glass**

ISSUES 1-3 **A solo series for the** Spider in all but name, this three-parter is a lightning-quick trip through the various decades represented in Rebellion's *Treasury of British Comics* archive.

With Tom Foster's Brian Bolland-esque art evocatively coloured to evoke the yellowish tinge of old newsprint, issue one opens in Victorian times with a short prologue starring escapologist Janus Stark, before Anna Morozova's sleek cartooning takes over for the remainder of the 1967-set issue, which pits Jane Bond and the Steel Claw against the King of Crooks.

Jumping to 1985, issue two adopts a grittier tone with Jimmy Broxton's finely detailed art, as the Spider battles Robot Archie after becoming trapped in malevolent computer Max's Thirteenth Floor. Finally, VV Glass brings a manga-flavoured quality to issue three's present-day conclusion.

Unlike the recent, similarly-themed *The Vigilant*, the scripts aren't overloaded with too many characters, with writer Paul Grist wisely restricting appearances from other classic Fleetway protagonists – although Cursitor Doom and Adam Eterno both play significant roles.

Given his natural affinity with the subject matter, it would be great if Grist also took a turn on art duties when this smashing series hopefully returns. **Stephen Jewell**

CAPTAIN AMERICA

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Marvel**
Writer **J Michael Straczynski**
Artists **Jesus Saiz, Lan Medina**

ISSUES 1-5 **While he's still best** known for creating *Babylon 5*, writer J Michael Straczynski has also done lots of work in superhero comics over the last three decades. After a lengthy hiatus, he's back with Marvel to take on the sturdy heroics of Steve Rogers.

This new run on *Captain America* is paying just as much attention to Steve's past as to his future, giving us a detailed look at his pre-Supersoldier-serum life in 1938 New York, as he battles both his poor health and the rise of Nazi-inspired fascist groups. Meanwhile, in the present day, the consequences of Steve's 1938 struggles result in a series of mysterious killings that pitches him against a sinister, demonically-powered psycho called the Emissary.

These first five issues deliver an unapologetically old-school pulp tale that taps into the determination and heroism at the heart of Captain America's character, and also puts its political subtext front-and-centre. While Straczynski isn't always a particularly subtle writer, he's often excellent at dialogue and crafts an engaging story here. Solid art from Jesus Saiz and Lan Medina, meanwhile, provides a strong visual foundation.

There are occasional stumbles – the supernatural plotline sometimes drifts into cheesiness – but otherwise, this new saga feels like mainstream superhero storytelling done right. **Saxon Bullock**

Sounds like yer head gasket's gone, pal.

TRANSFORMERS

SFX Loves

Prime directives

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Skybound**
Writer/artist **Daniel Warren Johnson**

ISSUES 1-4 **Skybound's shared** "Energon Universe" proved to be one of 2023's most pleasant comic book surprises. It stealth-launched in June with Robert Kirkman's space opera *Void Rivals*, and continues in the new *Transformers* – an unambiguously brilliant series by ascendant writer/artist Daniel Warren Johnson.

The story is partially a reboot of the '80s cartoon. A spaceship crash-lands on Earth, letting loose the noble Autobots, led by Optimus Prime, and the evil, scheming Decepticons, currently led by Starscream (big bad Megatron is still a looming threat at this point).. Our viewpoint characters are two human teens, Spike and Carly, but they're not the only ones to notice the aliens arriving on our planet...

"Has kisses to the past, but is completely newbie-friendly"

Fans of former licence-owner IDW's long-running *Transformers* comics may rue the reboot's existence, but there's little doubt that it has breathed new life into the franchise.

Johnson's *Transformers* has kisses to the past, but is completely newbie-friendly. The Decepticons here are genuinely threatening (one beloved Autobot doesn't make it out of the first issue alive, and a human death in issue two is both shocking and laugh-out-loud funny), while the ties to the wider Energon universe are effective but subtly done.

Best of all is Johnson's art. He effortlessly contrasts the scale and weight of these hulking robots with the fragility of the humans and their feeble weapons. Despite that, there are no leaden attempts at realism here – this *Transformers* is delightfully cartoony, full of motion and colour. There are smarter ongoing comic books out there right now, but few as giddily joyful and fun. **Will Salmon**

i The Energon Universe continues in GI Joe comics *Duke* and *Cobra Commander*, the first issues of which are both out now.

BIRDS OF PREY

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Comics**
Writer **Kelly Thompson**
Artist **Leonardo Romero**

ISSUES 1-5 **The latest *Birds Of Prey*** series takes flight with a new creative team and a revised line-up of characters.

Black Canary's sister Sin has been wrongfully imprisoned on Themyscira by the Amazons. Determined to rescue her, Dinah must assemble a new band of allies: Batgirl Cassandra Cain, Big Barda, Zealot, the mysterious Meridian (intriguingly revealed to be a future version of *Gotham Academy* character Mia Mizoguchi) and Harley Quinn – who brings a touch of comedy and good-natured chaos to the book.

Despite this large regular cast, everyone feels distinct and well-realised. There's a real freshness to writer Kelly Thompson's dialogue, and a pleasingly pulp look to Leonardo Romero's art that's massively enhanced by Jordie Bellaire's colouring – a tactile mix of bold primary colours and faded pastels. Issue five, which temporarily subs in Arist Deyn instead of Romero and Bellaire, remains solid, but is a noticeable step down from the title's regular look.

Superhero comics can be tough to get into, often coming mired in years of impenetrable continuity, but you can dive right into the new *Birds Of Prey* with no prior knowledge needed. It's an excellent place for newcomers to start and a superb comic all round, one that's immediately established itself as a highlight of DC's monthly releases. **Will Salmon**

STRANGER THINGS: THE FIRST SHADOW

Welcome to the atomic stage

★★★★½

BOOKING UNTIL 25 AUGUST

Venue **Phoenix Theatre, London**

Directors **Stephen Daldry, Justin Martin**

STAGE PLAY **That star rating** assumes you've seen most of the TV series. Because if you haven't, *The First Shadow* will be an utterly baffling, frustrating, experience. But even if you *are* a *Stranger Things* virgin pressganged into accompanying a partner, there are some stunning visuals to enjoy.

This is pure blockbuster theatre. With musical numbers. *The First Shadow* takes us back to Hawkins in the '50s, before the town went upside down. By the end, though, it's certainly beginning to flip. It's the origin story of season four's big bad, Vecna, chronicling how the disturbed young Henry Creel began his transformation into the nightmare creature. We also meet younger versions of Hopper, Joyce and Dr Brenner.

While the core of the story is steeped in Grand Guignol horror – often achieved with breathtaking visual trickery – *The First Shadow* reflects the show by having a parallel high school plotline, complete with a play within a play, as the kids put on their own production. And as in the show, the nostalgia and the horror dovetail effortlessly, even though it's set in a different era.

The play whiplashes back and forth between goofy and scary so rapidly it should come with a health warning. There are some big names behind the scenes, and the quality shows. Stephen Daldry (*The Crown*, *Billy Elliot*) co-directs. The storyline was crafted by *Stranger Things* creators the Duffer Brothers with Jack Thorne (*The Cursed Child*, *His Dark Materials*), with a final script by Kate Trefry, a writer for the series.

She was encouraged to intercut scenes like she would writing for TV, and not to worry about the constraints of theatre. The result is unusually pacy for a theatrical production. With its vast and spirited cast, spectacular effects and dizzying stage designs, this is well-crafted theatre that leaves an impression. Well, the visuals do, anyway. The story itself is slightly unfocussed, feeling more like an episode in an ongoing series than a self-contained entity, and lacking any killer revelations. But in terms of visceral impact, *The First Shadow* turns the dial all the way up to Eleven. **Dave Golder**

i Although the production features a ship, a car had to be cut. They couldn't drive it past all the other props backstage.

"Stranger thiiiings! Stranger THIIIIINGS!"

MANUEL HARLAN

LOST Season One

★★★½☆

RELEASED 2 February

65 minutes | Vinyl

Label **Varèse Sarabande/ Craft Recordings**

SOUNDTRACK **It's easy to forget** now, in these days of MCU and *Star Wars* Disney+ shows, just how cinematic *Lost* seemed when it debuted in 2004. A big part of that was Michael Giacchino's score, which brought a sense of mystery and menace. It's been available on CD and via streaming before, but this handsome "Oceanic Black Smoke" edition (basically a blue/black splatter effect LP) is the first time it's been pressed to vinyl. (A plain black vinyl edition is also available.)

We'll skip over the 17-second title music and go straight to "The Eyeland", which opens with the *THUD* that would become a familiar part of *Lost*'s sonic landscape, before moving into far creepier territory. "Credit Where Credit's Due" is a sweeping piece that recalls all those scenes of the survivors staring bleakly out at the ocean. "Hollywood and Vines" opens with a minimal ambient sequence before the orchestra sweeps in with a bold adventure theme. "Win One For The Reaper", meanwhile, is a simple piano piece that aches with loss.

These themes recur throughout in various forms, and are generally more compelling than the brasher numbers designed to accompany the Lostees fleeing the smoke monster, or the uncharacteristically jaunty "I've Got A Plane To Catch". It's a very listenable soundtrack that will make you want to dig out those DVD box sets. **Will Salmon**

THE FINALS

Money shots

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Reviewed on **PS5**
- Also on **PC, Xbox Series S|X**
- Publisher **Embark Studios**

VIDEOGAME **An FPS where you're** taking part in a sinister, deadly game show is a great idea. Sadly this is less *Squid Game*, more damp squib game, with the only nods to that idea being some awful commentary over the action.

Luckily, the free-to-play shooter under this inane presentation more than makes up for it. It's a multiplayer team game where kills don't matter. This is all about looting money and banking it before someone shoots you down and steals it for themselves. The juiciest payouts are kept in vaults, spread around the map, visible to all, and happy to take their sweet time to open.

It's a fun concept, boosted by how delightfully destructive it all is. Can't see a quick route to the vault? Use grenades to make your own. Vault on the ceiling and you're on the floor below? Take the roof out with an RPG and let the money come to you. It's as joyfully unsubtle as you'd expect from former *Battlefield* devs.

Appropriately for a game about brazen heists, *The Finals* has taken a lot from other shooters. The penny-pinching is very *Payday*, and banking the score before you're sniped very *Titanfall 2*. There's some *Overwatch* and *Apex Legends* too, so it can feel like a greatest hits collection. Still, it's nailed a fun core gameplay hook, with tons of potential to build something truly special. **Abbie Stone**

i Graffiti reading "SR.!" is a nod to Embark Studios co-founder Rob Runesson, dubbed "Saint Rob" by Easter egg hunters.

Giant pandas: not as cuddly as their reputation.

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MEDICAL MATTERS

Get your stethoscopes out: we're playing doctors and nurses for this issue's quiz. Ooh, Matron!

Quizmaster **Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor**

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 1
What do Majel Barrett and Jess Bush have in common?

QUESTION 2
In which 2019 TV series, set in the near future, do scientific advances mean spina bifida and macular degeneration can now be cured?

QUESTION 3
In the Canadian slasher *Visiting Hours*, who played the serial killer stalking the halls of a hospital?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
In which *Doctor Who* story would you find this hospital?

QUESTION 5
In *The Andromeda Strain*, what do the medical experts eventually discover will kill the microbe codenamed Andromeda?

QUESTION 6
On whose likeness was *Star Trek: Voyager*'s Emergency Medical Hologram modelled?

QUESTION 7
In the 1966 novel *Flowers For Algernon*, a man undergoes surgery to increase his intelligence. But who is Algernon?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
In which *Doctor Who* story would you find this hospital?

QUESTION 9
Which SF novel begins with the protagonist waking up in St Merryn's Hospital?

QUESTION 10
In the film *Dead Ringers*, Jeremy Irons played twin gynecologists Beverly and Elliot Mantle. But who played the Mantles in the 2023 TV adaptation?

QUESTION 11
In *Star Trek IV*, mention of which medical treatment prompts Dr McCoy to say, "My god, what is this, the Dark Ages?"

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
In which *Doctor Who* story would you find this hospital?

QUESTION 13
In *Prometheus*, what unusual use does archaeologist Elizabeth Shaw make of a self-diagnostic MedPod?

QUESTION 14
Which 1978 film centres on a coma patient in the Roget Clinic, a private hospital in Melbourne?

QUESTION 15
In David Cronenberg's *Rabid*, what kind of procedure causes the protagonist Rose to develop a taste for human blood?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
In which *Doctor Who* story would you find this hospital?

QUESTION 17
Complete the name of this 1988 medical drama, set in a hospital space station: ____ *Point*.

QUESTION 18
In *The Exorcist III*, what weapon does the Gemini Killer use for the murders in the hospital?

QUESTION 19
Which fictional hospital is entered by stepping through the window of a disused department store?

QUESTION 20
In the original *Star Trek*, some of Dr McCoy's sickbay instruments were actually household objects, bought by the prop master. What exactly were they?

Answers

1 Playing Enterprise nurse Christine Chapel 2 *Years And Years* 3 William Shatner 4 "The Invisible Enemy" 5 Blood with a pH too low or high 6 Dr Lewis Zimmerman 7 A mouse 8 "New Earth" 9 *The Day Of The Triffids* 10 Rachel Weisz 11 Dialysis 12 "Smith And Jones" 13 Removing a xenomorph 14 *Patrick* 15 Skin grafts 16 "World Enough And Time" 17 *Mercy* 18 Surgical shears 19 St Mungo's (*Harry Potter*) 20 Salt shakers

How did you do?

Where are you on the paygrade?

0-5
Hospital porter

6-10
Dental nurse

11-15
Paramedic

16-19
Matron

20
Senior consultant

PICTURES © BBC

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE SANDS OF TIME HAVE SHIFTED NOW AND THE END IS BEGINNING TO START...

DUNE: PART TWO

BATTLE FOR ARRAKIS!

A QUIET PLACE: DAY ONE
FINALLY SOME PEACE

3 BODY PROBLEM
EARTH INVASION!

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All contents are subject to change, depending on the next strike

Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy

Dragon's Claws

Darren Scott, Editor

Marvel UK stepped in a new direction in 1988, and it was *Doctor Who* that reeled me in.

Death's Head, their pre-established Transformers-battling bounty hunter – ahem, *freelance peacekeeping agent* – was sent to Earth in 8162, shrunk to human size by a Tissue Compression Eliminator-wielding Seventh Doctor and thrown through time. This set the wheels in motion for a very different type of Marvel Universe. Completely caught up in such crossovers, I was immediately on-board with their new launch title, *Dragon's Claws*.

Described as a "dystopian science fiction comic", it was created by Simon Furman and Geoff Senior and centred on titular character Dragon, a former famous player of The Game, a violent pastime banned in 8162. I was never sure what The Game actually was, but it involved teams trying to better each other, whatever the cost, while navigating post-apocalyptic terrain. I'm surprised it captured me, given how many notes I had to skip PE.

By issue two I was *hooked*, thanks to the introduction of the Evil Dead – a rival team led by Slaughterhouse, Dragon's old rival. These were brutal monsters and creatures of the horror persuasion. While the Claws were now law enforcers for NURSE (National Union of Retired Sports Experts), the Evil Dead were anything but, making this new comic very exciting indeed. Defeated in issue two, they would make a shocking return towards the end of the title's all-too-short 10-issue run.

Death's Head debuted in issue five, where the Claws kicked the metallic shit out of him, leading to a redesign for his own series. *Dragon's Claws* then crossed-over in that. By now I was fully invested in the Claws, though.

Dragon, their leader who took them to the top of The Game; Digit, the weird Scottish techie who's been partially rebuilt; Steel, a Japanese samurai who owes his life to Dragon; Mercy, a vigilante who avenged the murder of her father; and Scavenger, a former prisoner – each issue gave a little of their history away.

It ended, as so many great sci-fi projects do, on a cliffhanger, but this Marvel dip into *2000 AD* territory looms larger to me than many.

Darren has always remembered that medicine is the real currency of the day.

Fact Attack!

- The original title *Dragon's Teeth* was changed because another comic company owned it. Some adverts still sneaked out though!
- Each issue had a "FastFax" news bulletin about what was happening with the WDC (World Development Council), NURSE and beyond.
- NURSE Reloc Files (fact files, in other words) for each member of the Dragon's Claws team appeared in later issues.
- Writer Simon Furman believed that the US comic book size format was partially to blame for poor sales in the UK.
- A final one-page epilogue, called "Just One Page", was published in 2004, and reprinted in the 2008 graphic novel.

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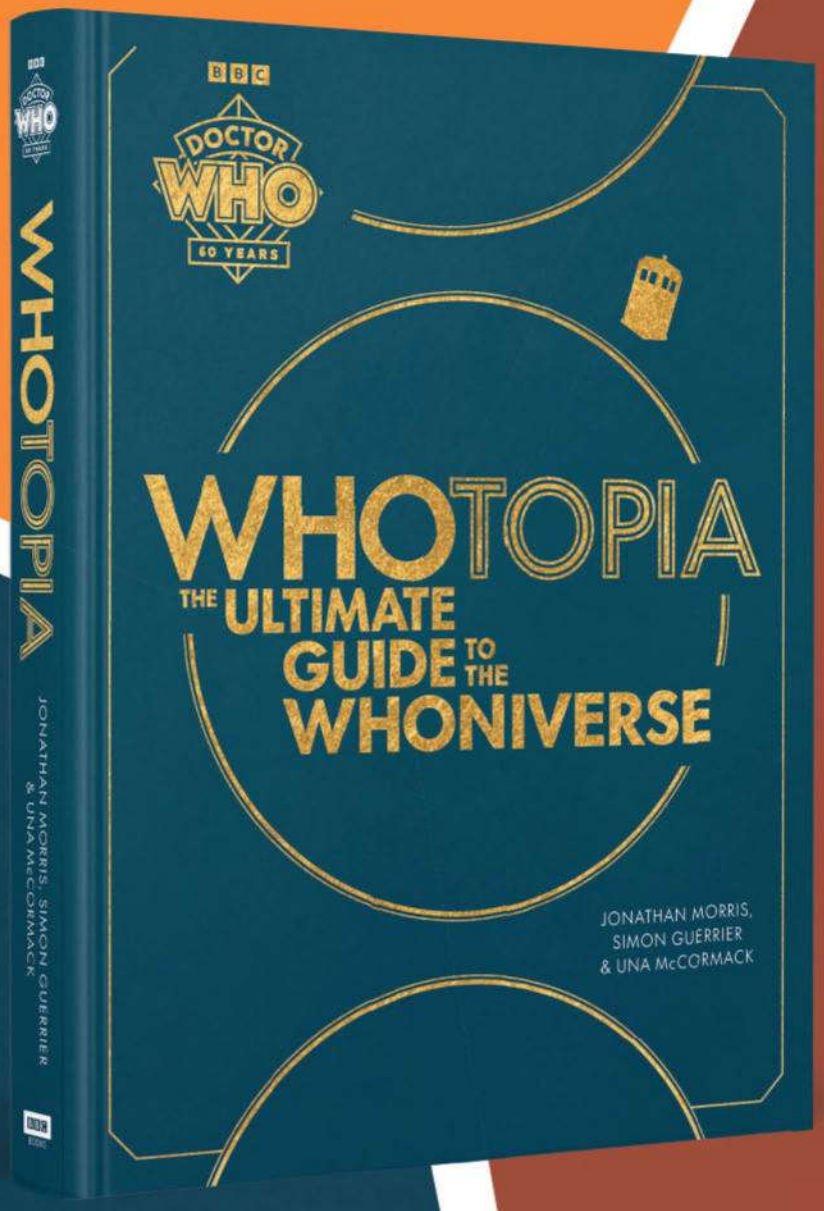
FIRST STOP: EVERYWHERE.



BBC DOCTOR WHO 60 YEARS

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